

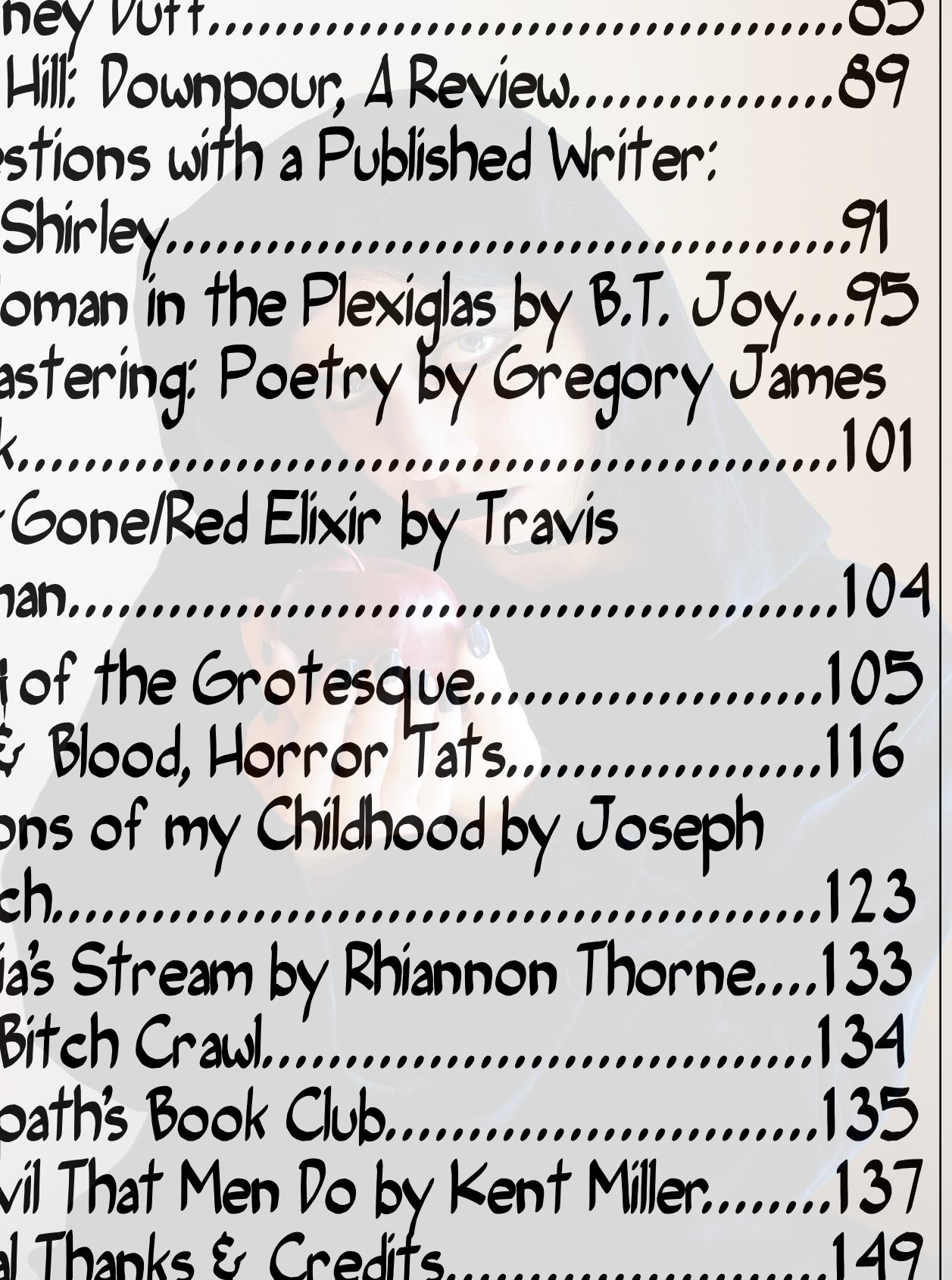
SURREAL GROTESQUE

Issue 5: Mutations & Mutilations



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COME INSIDE..





Stuffed By T.C. Hanssen

"I learned in war, hospitals are to practice being dead," Father runs his finger over an old scar. It is stretched and distended now, because of how he has gained and lost so much weight so many times since then, like a squirrel or a bird or a bear eating and starving with the seasons. "To practice being outside yourself. You can see little plastic bellows pumping their lungs; you can see their heartbeat and brainwaves, splattered up on screens. Anyone can just see all of this. Their waste too, just sitting in pans. When the tubes in their arms back up, you see their blood. Everything's outside of 'em except their soul. The soul's just lookin out through the eyes, and the blood and heart and brain are saying 'hey, come on out with us. It's nice out here.' Everything's just getting spread out; jumping ship."

He leaves then, and it does not feel good. It feels like the happiness that is fusing my bones together in this box. I do not remember ever being out of the box, though I must have been at some time. (How terrifying!)

Father rarely comes to speak at me, and I do not think he has ever heard my voice. Only my screams when I am so happy that I cannot keep it in. I am a very good screamer; sometimes father cries for the beauty of it and lets me drink from the bottle that mother uses to clean my infections and sores. It tastes like poisoned glass, but it is good for Father's insides and my outsides.

Mother is praying now, and I can hear her through the wall, which is thin like a moth's wing or a piece of peeled skin. "Dear God, almighty and powerful," she starts her prayer in the usual way, "Nothing is impossible for you, for it was you that created the Earth, and it was you who formed the sea."

I almost had my arm sawed off because of an infection one year ago, but Mother saved it with the rags and pills she made me swallow by pinching my nose.

"It was you that enforced the peace accord of the Enjoined nations, and it was you who set the jewelling stars in the heavens."

Because I am in this box like a turtle is in his shell, my body cannot grow when it tries to, so my bones and muscles and fibers are always pushing and shoving one another until they make me scream so loud the window rattles a little bit. I cannot move a single finger. Not a single one.

I hate to boast.

"It is you that guides the seasons and it is you who provided low-interest mortgages for families with one or more child volunteered for The Enjoined Construction Service."

All this jittering energy is happiness, my parents tell me, trying to explode outward. I now understand why father is such a greatly unhappy man. I admire him for finding so many ways to be unhappy, and I hope to be as unhappy as him some day.

"In all your omnipotence and your Economic Acumen, please keep the our son Cren's box intact, for we cannot build him a new one. If this box breaks, his body will grow like a normal boy, and he will not become

a deformed person. And who wants to see a normal boy perform on a great stage? So in your highest wisdom and well above average intelligence, allow our Cren to become deformed, that he may be an entertainer, and never want for food."

Because my bones are pushing against themselves to grow, but have no space for it, one bone in my arm split into two directions so it had more space to grow into. One part grew out through my skin and it became infected, but my mother made it so I did not lose my arm to a Green Gang. I do not know this gang, but they were going to saw off my arm, like another gang burned one of fathers hands in acid when he did not pay his Tithe.

"You will know God one day," Mother walks in the door and sits cross-legged before my box. "When we sell you to the city people, and they make you a famous entertainer. They do love deformed people in the city. How they laugh."

I wonder if being loved would make me unhappy. I do not think mother loves father, and he is very unhappy.

"You will always have food," she says, "and you will be civilized. You will know God. Perhaps you'll perform for him one day. All the best performers go to his Keep and perform for him. I heard he has floors of smooth stone there."

Mother goes down by the sea some times to stand on rocks. There is one smooth one she has found, which fits exactly one of her feet on it at a time. I can see her from my window down there, with one foot on the stone and one lifted in the air. I have not always been able to see her, because there used to be a house in the way. But the owners moved away, following everyone else who moved away, and Father burned down their house in spite. They owed him money when they moved away. They left their dog behind, but he is gone now.

I didn't get any. Mother and Father only feed me leaves. This way, it is hard for my body to grow.

Not to interrupt her, I wrinkle my nose, so Mother knows to pull open the bottom plank of the box and clean the offal out of it and off of me. She sees this and does so, sermonizing on the handsomeness of God's mustache, and saying she would, if it were legal, persuade Father to grow a mustache like that. It is quite a handsome mustache. This is why it is only legal for God to grow it and to look so handsome.

I think about hairs, starting in little follicles inside one's skin and growing out, and I begin to breathe too hard and get dizzy. Mother mistakenly thinks it's because the box is open, and she closes the plank, but I keep breathing too much air and inflating with it and I start to feel like I might expand and break the box, and I can't breathe at all now, my lungs are bellowing faster than ever but no air is getting in. Mother wraps herself around my head so I can see nothing, like I'm in a soft warm cave, and I can no longer feel my heartbeat trembling the wood planks of the box. Her ribs press into my face through her leather skin.

I am okay now, I say, and she tells me how my brother is one of God's monks, though he's never met God personally. Still, he considers it an honor to be undertaking the holy work on God's construction sites. That is what the letters say--see? They even taught him to read and write. Mother only knows to read because her father used to work in the city before God took the throne. Well, he made it first. Then took it. Father can follow along reading with her, but cannot read on his own. --Brother had to pay for the courses and equipment himself, where they taught him about construction and safety. His work is volunteer, but he pays off for the courses by working more than his assigned 60 hours each week. Now he helps build a regional headquarters Temple of God, in a plains city, I think.

Father comes in and doesn't hit mother. In each hand, he holds out to her half of her flatrock. "It broke when I shot it." She starts to weep. "My aim's getting better," he says with an eyebrow motion and a flick of his wrist so slight I think it might just be his shakes. She stops crying and just pushes my hair back over my ears. Father drops half of the stone so he has a hand to wrap around the bottle by Mother's rags and drink from

it. He leaves the room, humming through the wet mouthful. He tried to drown me once, but I don't remember it.

Mother tries to lift the half-stone just so on the floor so she can stand on it with the pad of her foot if she lifts her heel up. Her calf muscles pop out like father's neck muscles, but she keeps falling. My bones screech, and I take the opportunity to outlet some tears, so she'll think that I am crying from sympathy instead of from the tectonic grind of happiness inside me. (A number of my ribs are fused together, like a tree grafting its branches onto itself.)

"When we die, Cren, our spirits fly out, and they get an office in God's Regional Temple. For us, this is Temple K-143. We get to live on beams in the sky and call those who have not paid their tithes this quarter to inform them of the interest accruing and the enforcers coming to collect from them." She cries at the beauty, "We'll each have our own office."

*

A letter from my brother today.

Respected Family Members,

Work on the construction in Region N-18 is progressing as planned. Praise be to God's Economic Acumen, which has provided sufficient funding for my food and housing. I have performed Adequately in the eyes of God, and of his on-site supervisor, Tarko Flek. You should feel a level of pride in me appropriate to the level at which I have performed. Remember that your Tithes are due at the end of this 3rd quarter, Godtober 14th.

This exchange has been pleasant and rewarding.

Selli Forst (deceased)

Mother says he writes like a poet. I have never read a poet, but I do not doubt Mother. Father merely grunts and puts a chapped finger under the last word. "Think that's a promotion?"

"It must me," Mother says, "Last time he was a 'recaptured--awaiting trial' and before that a 'deserted.'"

"He's come a long way since 'Brother of the Order of the Fork Lift', hasn't he?"

Mother folds up the letter and tucks it bird-like into her bosom. "I'm going to try to feel an adequate level of pride now." She sits cross-legged and stared at the ground determinedly.

I feel the cold hard mouth of the bottle between my teeth, and I accept the wet fire Father pours down my throat. It is warm inside my box, and it makes the happiness go dim for awhile. It replaces it with something pleasant.

"I wonder if he'll meet God soon," Mother moans.

Their Tithe is due next week, so they have decided it is time to sell me. Mother spends the morning trying to balance on her half flatstone while father makes space for me and my box on the cart.

The road bumps and jars and makes my face twitch with happiness, and I feel so very well-contained in my box. The bone that grew out of my skin has skin grown over it now, so even that is contained, except for a small nub at the end that looks like a horn or a fingernail. The thought of someone buying me and taking me out of my box is worrisome. What if I dissolve when the wind hits me and my box is not here to hold me together?

Father cracks open a nut, and I shudder.

We reach a clod of buildings, and Mother and Father run frantically screaming in all directions. I didn't know buildings could curve like this. Where do they keep the corners? When they calm, Father slams mother with her rock and her foot cracks under it. He explains to me (though he is too close and loud for me to clearly hear him, so I mostly gather the message from his amputated echoes) that this, this, it used to be our fucking city, our fucking. GAH. People. All left. gone. No one to--to buy, to sell, to fuckingfucking fuck. Shit (shit-it-it--i--i). He goes back to kick mother on the ground, but she stabs his calf with some glass she found. Her hand bleeds too, from how she held the shard while stabbing. A strange old man walks out from a side street, pulling a cart behind him. When Father sees the man through his tears, he scrambles to his foot and drags himself over to the white-hair and tells him about me. "Just look at him. Hilarious! And he has this nub growing out of one of his arms. Imagine the fun you could have, showing him off!"

The old man silently rummages through his cart and brings out a bottle of father's drink.

"No, no. Money. We need to pay our Tithe."

The old man thrusts the bottle at him again. Father looks around at the city, then holds up two fingers. The old man pulls another bottle out of his cart and hands them both over. Father and Mother cheer, and she takes her locket off to put it around my neck. "God with you," she hastily murmurs, returning to the cart with her hand wrapped in her skirt, limping so father has to support her on the side that he crushed her foot.

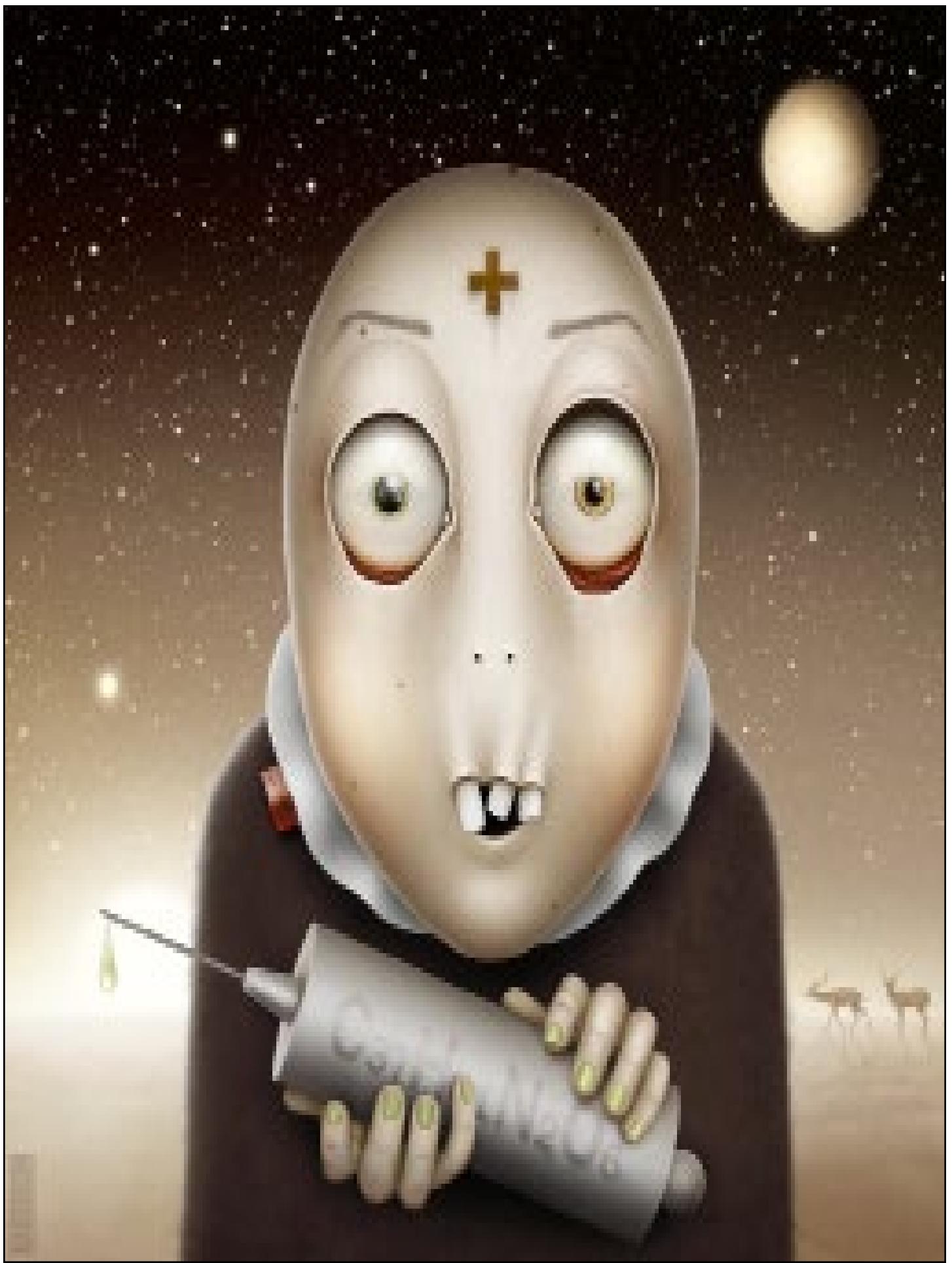
When they leave, the old man looks at the locket. "They're still using that old picture, huh?" he asks. This is when I recognize his mustache and faint.

I come back awake.

But your hair is so white, I say.

"That's what 30 years does," he tells me. "Are they still rolling out those old videos on TV too?" he asks me, and I nod. "Smart. No signs of a struggle. That's why they're up in their skyscrapers, running the world, and we're here, trying to trap some wolf meat."

This is when I notice that my box is gone, and I am laying on the ground naked. My body is still pulled all together much in the shape of a box though. My muscles have never been used, and when I try to struggle, my legs sort of flutter, and that is all. "I see you're thinking of running away," he says, and laughs very hard. His knife is serrated, and just one tug pulls my side open. The blood oozes out in starts and stops, which seems strange until I realize it must be my heartbeat pushing it out. I howl for God to help me, but he shrinks back into the bushes with his pistol and knife in hand. A wolf howls somewhere close. Everything starts to go warm and far, and finally, I'm not happy anymore. Not happy at all.





VUZEL

THE COLLECTION

LINDSEY McBRIDE

They had moved. Lucy was certain.

She pushed her button nose up against the dusty glass. Her excited mouth cast a barrier of fog between her and the collection. They fluttered. Lucy widened her eyes. If they moved again, she would catch it. She would see. She forced another blink and swore she saw a flicker of movement just before the dark. Her eyes blasted open. Nothing.

They must be afraid, she thought. They must be afraid because they're stuck under the glass and they can't fly anymore. And it probably hurt to be pinned to the yellow cotton like that.

It was decided. She would set them free.

Her tiny fingers slid along the edges of the frame, desperately searching for an opening. Nothing. She gingerly lifted it from the table, careful to keep from shaking her friends loose. The back was seamless: no door, no lever, no hope for freedom. She placed it down and stepped back, hoping the space between them would invite a solution. All the muscles in her face tightened as she forced every synapse to fire. There had to be some way. They needed her help.

It was the sound that made Lucy scream. The wood snapped like bone and the glass rained down upon the tiled floor. She hadn't even noticed the bloody opening in her palm until Aunt Aggie burst into the study. Seeing her precious collection destroyed, Aggie looked at her five-year-old niece, covered in blood and tears, and decided she must be punished.

Lucy remembered it as though it were her favorite page in a picture book, dog-eared and full of color. The vanessa crimsons and morpho blues had tattooed themselves to the inside of her eyelids, and her palm still ached every time the clouds crept over the Rockies. The walls of the shed had taken on a reddish tinge over the years, and the pine had turned sulfurous and metallic. Lucy looked into the opaque eyes of the raccoon she had trapped earlier that day, and made her first incision. Its limbs hung lifelessly, its stiff muzzle pointed toward the floor.

She had killed the raccoon herself, had felt its neck snap beneath her delicate fingers. It had been struggling in the trap for at least a day before she found it. It had panicked and filled its lungs and stomach with air, so that it continued to heave and cough in Lucy's arms long after she had killed it. She had held it close while it emptied itself of spirit.

She placed the pelt on the worktable and examined what was left of the animal. Its blank eyes stared back, its body pink and naked.

"You're wetting the fur." Lucy had not heard Aggie enter the shed.

"I'm not."

"You're not paying close attention. You're distracted. Concentrate."

"I am." Lucy's small voice did little convincing.

Without warning, Aggie snatched the pelt from Lucy and began scrubbing. Lucy's hands felt empty, though they momentarily found comfort in each other. She stroked the top of her hand with her thumb as her aunt paid the dead attention usually reserved for the living. She blanched. A surge of life crept up from inside her. She tried to fight it back down, but could not. She vomited. She heaved and coughed warm chamomile bile onto the dead flesh that her aunt had been so carefully laving. Her hand flew to her mouth and she turned away as Aggie's long, bony fingers stretched across her shoulder.

"You will finish this and then you will come finish dinner," Aggie said.

Lucy nodded.

After stretching the pristine hide out for tanning, Lucy washed up and returned to the main house. The thick aroma of chicken apple stew mingled with notes of newsprint and formaldehyde. Old newspapers, some dating back more than thirty years, lined the shelves. A stag head stared blankly from above the fireplace, and below lie the hide of a grizzly, gutted and empty. Lepidoptera lined the walls, trapped forever in glass prisons. Aggie sat in her smoking chair, casually brushing the fur of her long dead dachshund, its mouth permanently ajar in an expression of forced contentment. Her eyes remained fixed on the dog's coat as Lucy passed by her to tend to dinner.

One by one, Lucy dropped the thick spoonfuls of dumpling batter into the pot. They slid slowly off the spoon and plopped into the stew, sending a spattering of gravy onto the front of Lucy's dress. Thick, burning life once again rose up her esophagus. She could taste it, tart and sugary. She closed her eyes tight and swallowed, nearly muffling the sound of the doorbell.

Lucy wiped her hands on her dress and rushed to the entryway to find Aggie standing before the open door.

"Lucy can help you," Aggie volunteered to the visitor.

Curious, Lucy peered out onto the porch.

"Terrence has hit himself a deer and was kind enough to think of me and my collection," Aggie said. The corners of her mouth crept outward.

"It's no trouble," Terrence said, as he tipped his head in Lucy's direction. His jaw softened and the muscles tightened around his eyes.

"Give him a hand taking it to the shed, will you?"

Lucy obeyed, her chin sinking deeper into her chest. She looked down at the specks of blood and gravy that

dotted the front of her dress and the color drained from her face. Head bowed, she followed Terrence to his truck. She knew him well enough. She'd seen him every Sunday at church for the past twelve years. He had a wife, Mildred, and two young sons, one of which was her age. Sometimes she'd been lucky enough to see him drive his truck around town when she went to the market. He'd nod his head, as he often did, and she would occasionally muster up a wave. Now, walking behind him, careful to keep a safe four or five steps behind, she watched his flesh push out against his denim and yearned to feel it against her skin, everywhere.

"I can handle the doe if you show me where to throw her," Terrence said.

Lucy nodded. They reached the truck and Terrence dropped the tailgate. The smell was incredible, but Lucy knew worse.

"I got her good, the poor girl," Terrence said, casually slapping his hand against the side of his truck. "Never had a chance."

Lucy stood back as Terrence leaned into the box and pulled the doe's hind legs toward the edge. Then, with great effort, he hoisted the animal onto his shoulders. Already weakening under the weight, he looked to Lucy for direction. She motioned toward the shed and he began walking. Lucy rushed ahead to open the door. The air inside was thick with blood. Lucy blushed. Desperate to be rid of the animal, Terrence rushed past her and heaved it onto the table.

"Well, all right," he nodded.

Lucy nodded back. She kept her eyes square on the floor in front of her, occasionally stealing glances of Terrence's work boots. She silently measured the space between them, three feet she guessed, and wondered if his skin felt as rough and leathery as it looked.

Suddenly the dusted boots moved closer and she looked up to find Terrence's face inches from hers. She let out a slow, deep breath as he placed his hand on her shoulder. She looked down at the man's brown, aged hand, and the smear of deer blood that stained her dress beneath it.

"Take good care of her," he said.

Lucy nodded. So did Terrence. He turned and walked back to his truck. Lucy watched as he closed up the tailgate and opened the driver side door. He leaned in, stretched his body across the seat, and tossed something in Lucy's direction. She fumbled and it fell to the ground. It was a soft, ripe peach. She picked it up.

"Milly picked 'em this morning. First harvest. Always the sweetest," he told her.

Lucy sat on her front porch and watched as the truck became smaller and smaller before disappearing entirely from view. She waved goodbye to the empty road and brought the peach to her lips. As her teeth pierced its skin, the juices burst out in every direction. They dribbled down her chin and shot past her tongue and down her throat. Terrence was right. The first was the sweetest. She finished the peach and it rested comfortably inside her. No sudden pangs sent it creeping back up. She sucked on the pit for a few seconds before burying it a few inches deep in the dried up flowerbed beside her. As she stared at the small pile of dirt she had so carefully nestled around the pit, she knew what had to be

done.

She skipped down the porch to the shed and took one last look at the dead animal laid across the table.

“Poor girl,” she said, gently patting the side of its head. “You never had a chance.”

She opened the cupboards and stretched out the front of her dress, tossing all the bottles of formaldehyde she could carry into it. She bundled it up against her heart and returned to the main house.

Aggie was right where Lucy knew she would be, sitting in the smoking chair with her loyal companion. She took one look at her niece, hem to chin, and knew she had to be punished.

“Lucy,” Aggie shouted, “let your dress down!”

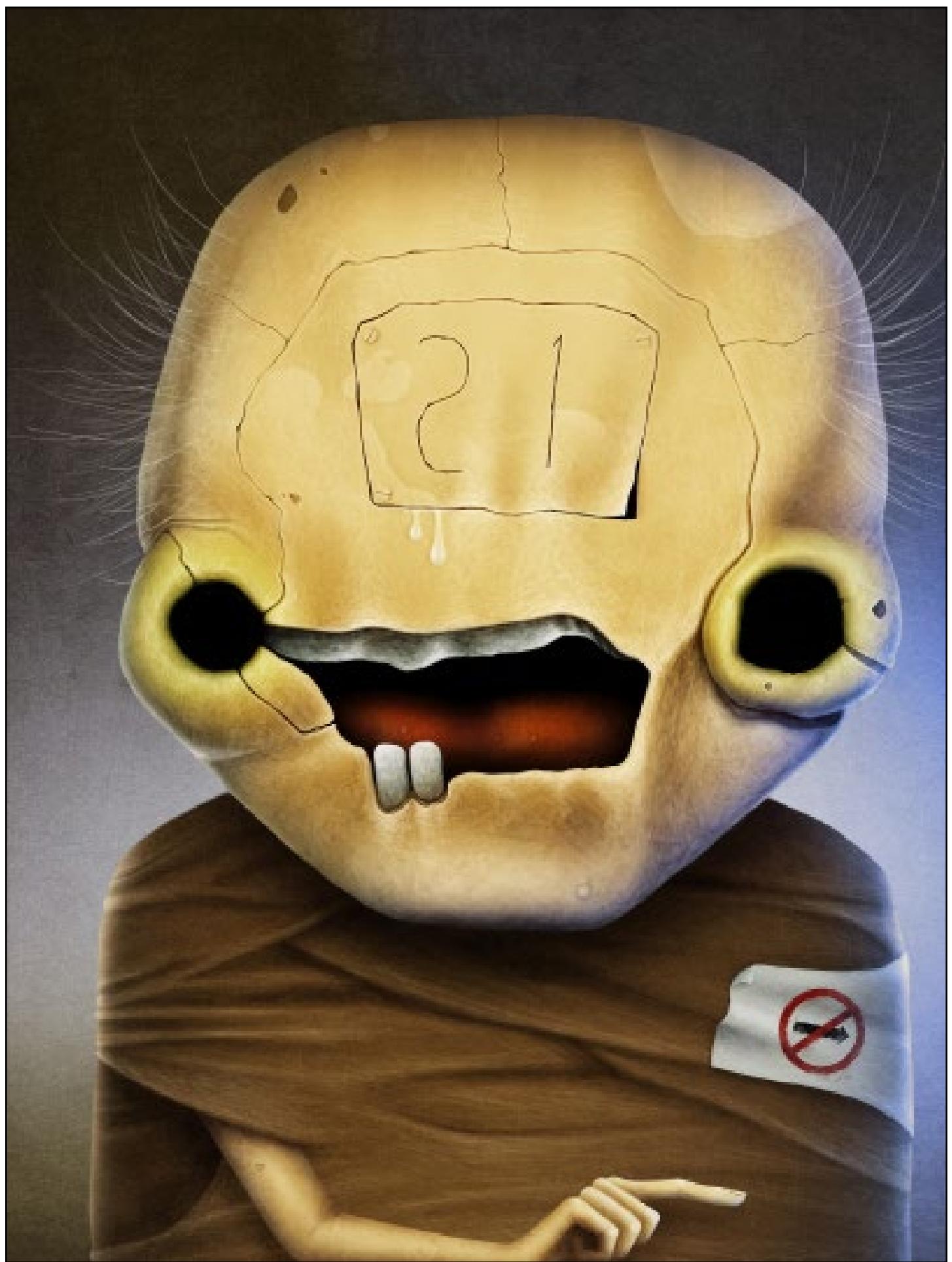
Lucy ignored her aunt and knelt to the floor at her feet instead, letting all the bottles roll out around her. She looked to the stag. It looked back. She looked at the bear hide. Its body rose and descended. The butterflies lining the walls fluttered against the glass. Even Aggie looked alive, her skin pink and supple. The dachshund panted happily and nestled deeper into her lap.

Aunt Aggie’s delicate throat caved in on itself under the slightest pressure.

“There you are, poor girl,” Lucy whispered, brushing a few wiry strands from her aunt’s empty eyes.

She emptied each bottle entirely before striking a match from the mantelpiece. She started with the old newspapers. The shelves were engulfed in flames within seconds. The fire spread quickly. Lucy sat on the floor, cross-legged, and watched as the fire danced around her, full of life.





7 QUESTIONS WITH A PUBLISHED WRITER

CHRISTOPHER GOLDEN



SG: You are probably one of the most eclectic writers that I've read. Your career spans everything from writing non-fiction guides to great cult shows like Buffy, a book on Stephen King, Neil Gaiman, fantasy, science-fiction and horror novels as well as the graphic novel format. Do you just go with your gut or are you just driven to all different types of projects?

CG: From time to time, as with the book I did last year with Guillermo del Toro that tied into his remake of DON'T BE AFRAID OF THE DARK, I'm recruited for a project. But yes, it's much more about going with my gut, because a lot of the time when I'm recruited, I say thanks-but-no-thanks. I've turned down some things that would have made me a lot of money and I've also accepted things that I've gotten some crap about, but in each instance, I did it because it was something I wanted to do. Of course there's also a money motive, but

I don't think I've ever said yes to anything *just* for the money. For my own projects--the things I create--I'm fortunate in that I have a lot of ideas and they cover a lot of different genres and mediums. I think the way that I've diversified in my career has been the best and worst thing I've done. Best in the sense that having so many plates spinning has allowed me to keep paying the bills when one or two of them fall and shatter. Worst in the sense that I think my potential readership is splintered and people tend to like writers they can put a label on. That's just not me.

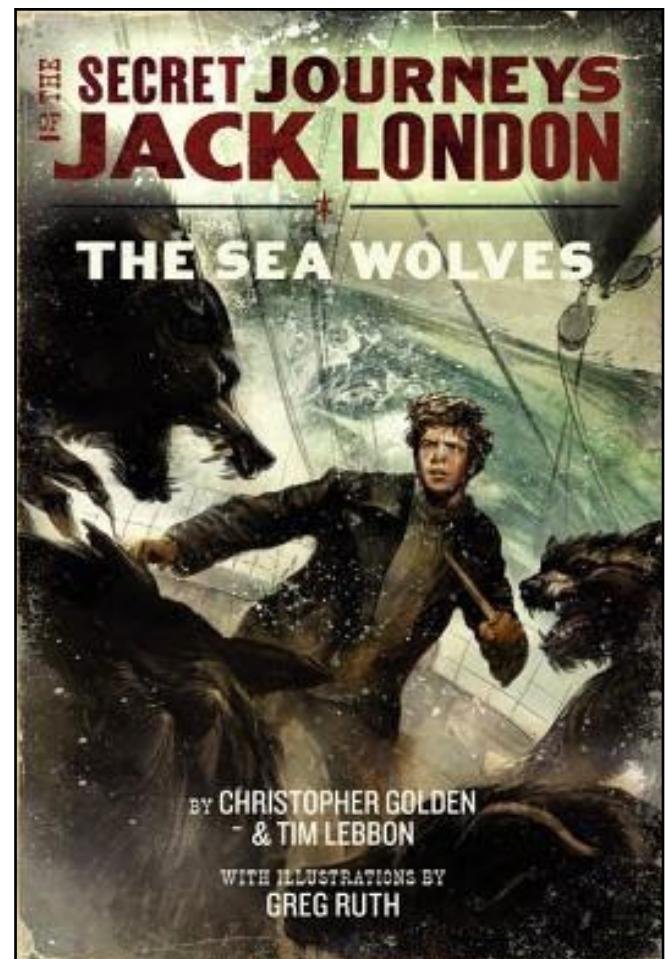
SG: Do you like playing with other people's character creations like Buffy, Hellboy, X-men, Star Wars, King Kong, Uncharted or even more recently you did the book "Don't Be Afraid of the Dark" based on the Guillermo Del Toro movie? How is that creative process different than working purely from your own imagination?

CG: Every project is different. With Buffy and X-Men and Hellboy, it's just a blast to play with someone else's toys, to take this property that you already love, that already has great characters, and come up with your own stories that might delve into the characters in a way that pleases you and also provides an adventure the fans wouldn't have gotten to experience otherwise. The one rule in those instances is that you don't put other people's toys back into their toybox broken. When I'm doing media tie-in stuff, it's always just something that makes me happy. If the fourteen-year-old me would have thought it was awesome, then I know it's going to be a pleasure. But that's very different from the more intimate, personal

writing that comes from a deeper place inside you and that goes into creating an original work.

SG: You also seem to do a lot of books as collaborative efforts by working with other writers. Do you find that to be an easy process? A lot of writers I know can be control freaks when it comes to character control and writing pace and style. How do you work around these things?

CG: Well, most of my collaborators will tell you that I *am* a control freak. I do tend to want the final pass on a manuscript. At the same time, I'm very collaborative when it comes to writing and revising and, more importantly, conceiving and imagining. Sometimes collaboration is easier than other times, but don't let anybody ever tell you it isn't harder than writing on your own, because it is. That's why I work with my friends and writers I respect. I enjoy collaboration--creating something together is a different and invigorating experience. It reminds me of times with a childhood friend, when we'd have an idea that we thought was the single greatest idea ever. It's the enthusiasm of collaboration that's attractive.



SG: Of all your works, which ones would you say you are most proud of?

CG: Tough question. Of my solo adult novels, I'd say the ones I'd most recommend to people who wanted to read something of mine are STRANGEWOOD, THE BOYS ARE BACK IN TOWN, and THE OCEAN DARK (written as Jack Rogan). Of my solo YA, it'd be the BODY OF EVIDENCE series, just because I'm so proud of what I did (and what I did with Rick Hautala as co-author on the second half of the series) over the course of ten books. Collaboratively, all of the stuff I've done with Mike Mignola is at the top of my list. I think Tim Lebbon and I really got it right with THE MAP OF MOMENTS. And I think Tom Sniegoski and I really had something going with our MENAGERIE series, and we'd like to finish that up someday. I love 'em all, of course, to greater or lesser degrees. There are only one or two books I'd like to sweep under the rug, and after a hundred or so, that's not half bad.

SG: You have also edited and contributed to many anthologies, what advice do you have to fledgling writers who are recently published or trying to make an impression with an editor to make their work really stand out?

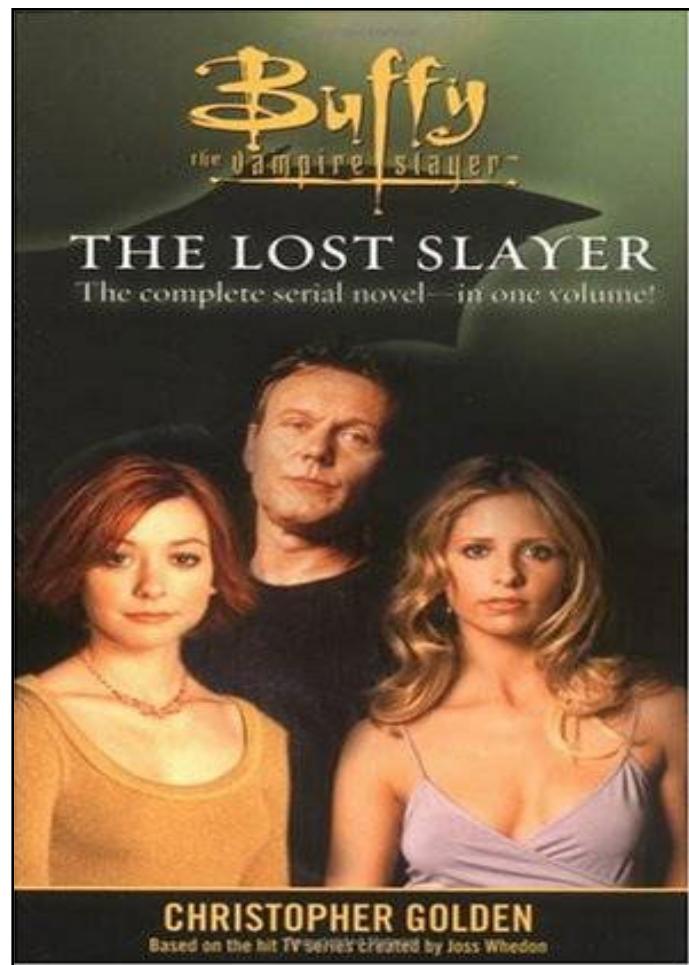
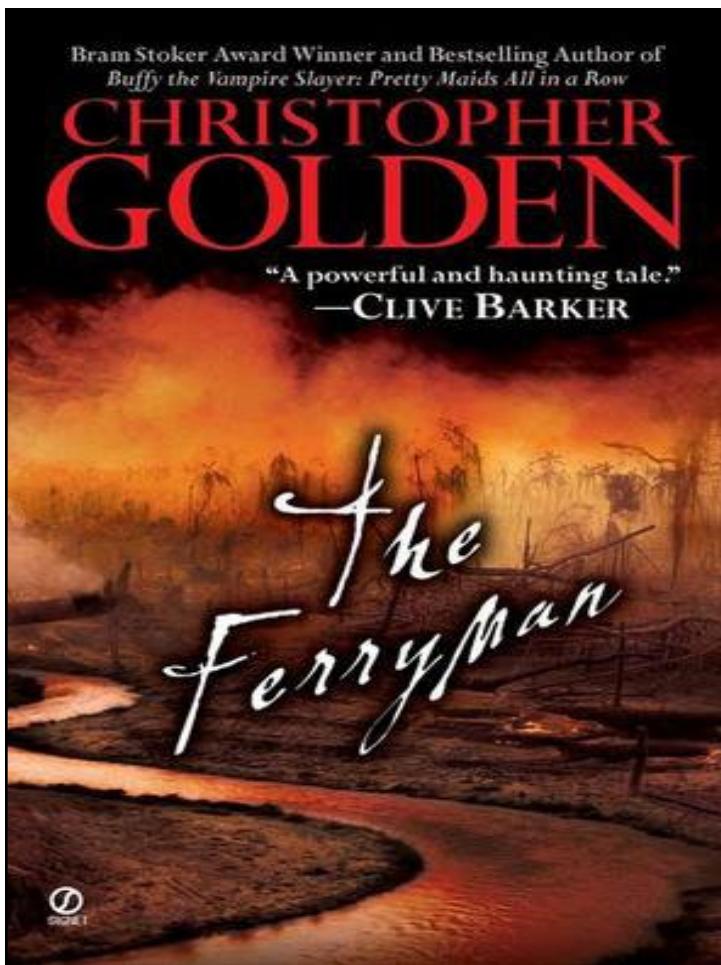
CG: Don't suck. You think I'm kidding, but I'm really not. Everyone knows you need a strong opening sentence, opening paragraph, opening page...but it should all be strong. Cut the chaff. Read it aloud to find out if the sentence structure is awkward. Don't try to be clever. Just tell your story cleanly and clearly. If it works, it will work without you trying to write in a way that makes it sound important and weighty. If it doesn't work, adding more words is not going to make it.

SG: If you had to pick one overriding theme to your works or philosophy of moral truth, what would you say that is? Do your characters exist in a moral universe of absolute good and evil or are there gray areas?

CG: There are always gray areas. My characters exist in a world where the only thing that matters is how you behave toward others, and a world where nothing worthwhile is free, where victory costs. If there's one theme that appears often in my work, it's that. Everything worthwhile costs us something in blood, sweat, or tears. Another that I return to frequently is that we are the sum of our experience, usually used to illustrated my terror of Alzheimer's disease.

SG: Finally, I notice your latest project with Tim Lebbon is about the "secret journeys of Jack London". How did this come about? Is it fun working with real historical figures and fictionalizing their lives? (Any other projects you want to plug?)

CG: Tim and I were out at dinner at the World Horror Convention in Toronto one year, drinking and eating Thai food with ten or so other people. Tim was talking about how he'd written the novelization of 30 DAYS OF NIGHT and somehow mentioned vampire polar bears. I jumped on it. Vampire polar bears! We should write that book, do it like some kind of Jack London adventure. Then it became, we should write London's real adventures, the things he feared nobody would believe but that were the supernatural origins for his decidedly non-supernatural novels.. And we'll call it THE SECRET JOURNEYS OF JACK LONDON. There was a fellow there who is co-owner of a smallish publishing house and he made an offer right there at the table, only to go home after the convention to have his business partner tell him no f'ing way were they paying that for these books. We shrugged our shoulders and moved on and the books landed with Harper Collins eventually. We were very happy about that. And now Fox 2000 is developing it as a film. Tim and I wrote the first draft of the script, but I'm sure it'll be very different by the time it surfaces. Can't wait to see how it turns out!



"I think I'm adopted"



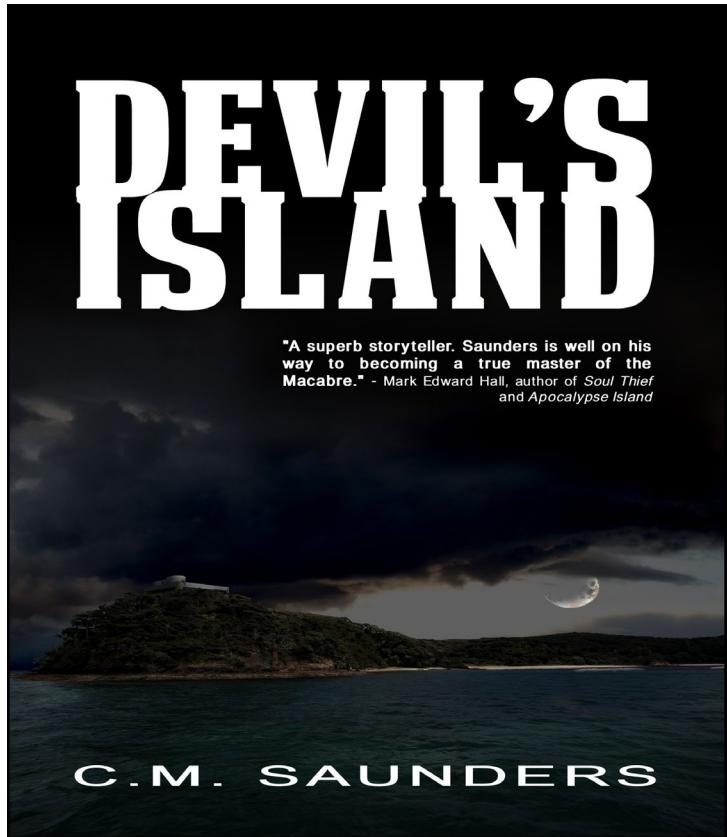
"Killers in the Mist"





DEVIL'S ISLAND: A BOOK REVIEW

BY BRITTANY WARREN



Hold onto your mundane lives, because we're taking a trip to *Devil's Island*, a Psychological Horror novel that preys upon description, and eats what you thought was real for its hearty, English breakfast. The novel tells the story of our protagonist, Davon Rice, England's resident job-seeker whose life gets seemingly more interesting when he takes a position with Prescott Services, a shady security group who work from Devil's Island. He packs his bag, and the story is left to its own devices to sneak right in and creep out the reader.

I enjoyed the descriptions used in the story, as they were quite engaging, and arranged to create a great page-turner. However, along with the enjoyment in each description, I also noticed a few typos and grammatical

errors, which, at times managed to catch me off guard, as well as disrupt the story, but in a minor way.

The level of mystery used in the novel generated vast amounts of suspense for me as a reader, and I feel that anyone else who partakes will feel the same, if you enjoy mind-crunching horror just as much as I do. The novel produces quite the mind-twist, very reminiscent of Dennis Lehane's *Shutter Island*. The fact that this story is so similar is what gives it that extra spoonful of enjoyment.

I really felt as if I were right next to Davon throughout his journey, partaking in his scares and sharing in his wonder and confusion. Mr. Saunders has done a fantastic job at creating a memorable atmosphere, complete with creepy characters and an unforgiving plot. I recommend for anyone who is in need of a little scariness in their lives.







Serial Killer of the Month Club: John Wayne Gacy Jr.



John Wayne Gacy was born on St. Patrick's Day of 1942 to Danish and Polish parents. Grew up in a working-class neighborhood of Chicago, Illinois. His father, John Wayne Gacy Sr was a raging alcoholic who beat him and his siblings along with his mother constantly.

As Gacy grew up, the non stop verbal abuse he would get from his father made him develop a identity crisis, doubting his own masculinity. At the age of 11, he suffered a blow to the head from a swing and because of that he had frequent blackouts for the next five years. The doctors found a clot in his brain as a result from the blow and removed it with medications. Following that, he would fake 'heart problems' for attention. John was a shy kid growing up and even though he wasn't very popular, he was well liked by his teachers and fellow classmates in school.

John later went on to graduate from business college and started work as a shoe salesman. Gacy married a co-worker, whose family just so happen to own a KFC in Waterloo, Iowa and began to work there as the Manager. He gradually earned the respect of the local Jaycees. He was well liked in his community and was a Democratic precinct captain in the Chicago suburbs in the 1970s.

Gacy married twice and had two children. May, 1968 he was arrested for sexual misconduct with a young male employee. Gacy actually hired a thug to beat up the witness, which ended up failing and only increased the charges against him. He plead guilty to sodomy and was sentenced to 10 years. Gacy was a model prisoner and was paroled in 1970 after serving only 18 months.

He then moved to Chicago where he began his new life as a building constructor. Gacy became popular with his new neighbors and colleagues. He would throw theme parties and often dress up as "Pogo the Clown" for children parties and visit the sick children in the hospital. Gacy was once again charged with sexual misconduct towards a young man on February 12, 1971. The witness did not show up in court and the charges were dropped. He finished his parole on October 18th, 1971 and committed his first murder on January 3rd, 1972. He would drive around town looking for fresh meat.

Often young male runaways, ex-jailbirds or even male prostitutes. Gacy's victims ranged in age from 9 to 20 years. In order to lure his victims to him, he went down the typical route of a Serial Killer. He would pretend to be a cop by showing them a badge or a gun and arrest them. He would later befriend them and take them home where he would show them magic tricks.

Once he had subdued his victim he would go on to torture, sodomize and garrote them. He would dispose of the bodies by burying them in a crawl space beneath his house. He would start to dump bodies in neighboring rivers once he ran out of room in the crawl space. in 1976, the killings escalated cause he had the house to himself after he divorced his second wife.

On December 12th, 1978 he killed his 33rd and last victim. A 15-year-old boy named Robert Piest who happened to live in the same neighborhood as Gacy. Robert told someone that he was going to see his "Contractor" about a job and was never seen again. The "Contractor" turned out to be Gacy. When the police dropped by his house they noticed the smell from the decomposing corpses underneath.

After they ran his police record, it wasn't hard for them to get a search warrant of his house. 29 bodies

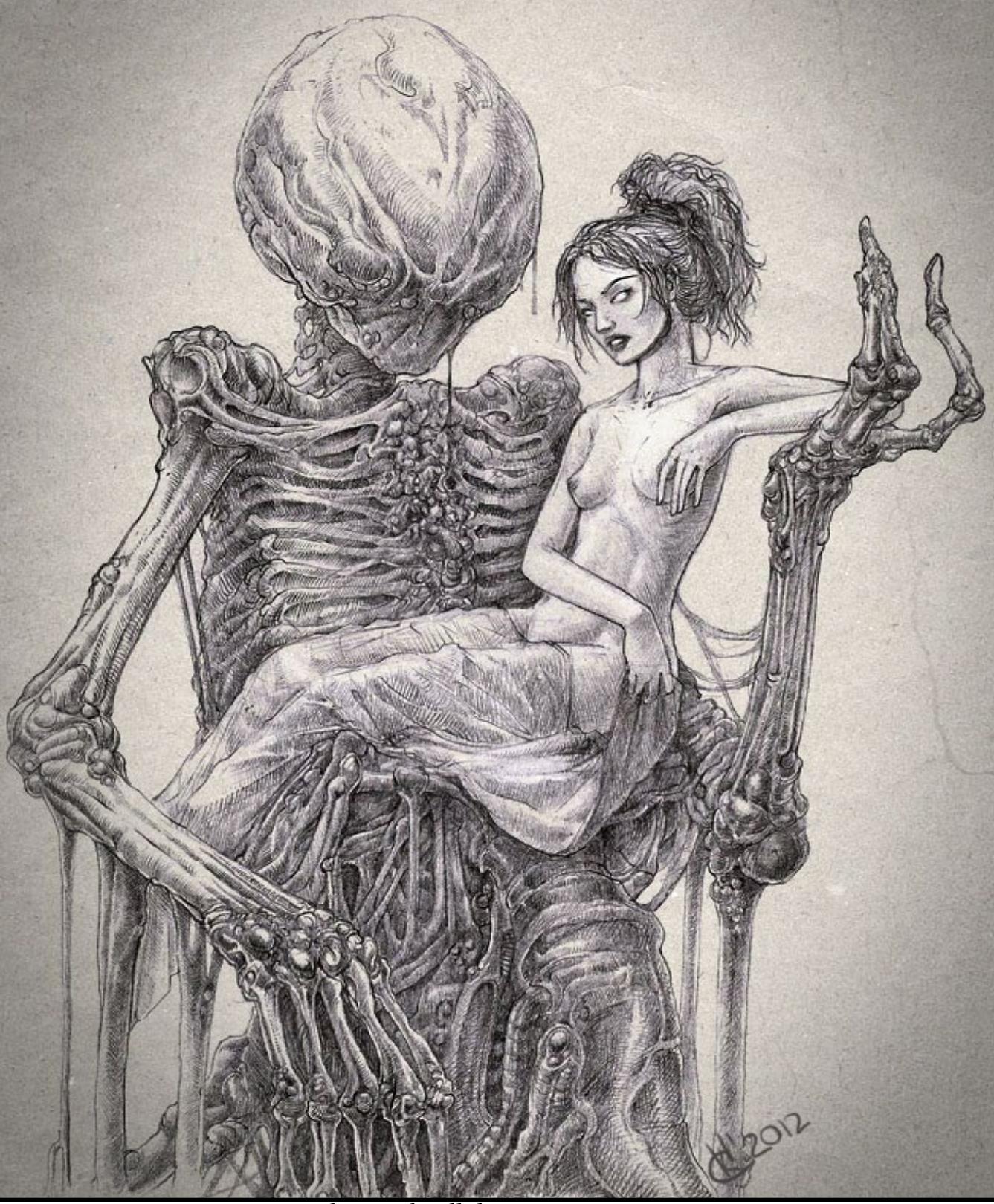
were found in his crawl space and 5 more in a nearby river, 9 of which remained unidentified. Gacy tried to justify himself by claiming he suffered from multiple personality disorder and the murders were made by his alternative personality Jack Hanson. During some of the murders he would be dressed up as his alter ego Pogo the Clown.

While Gacy was in Prison, he spent most of his time making oil paintings. He would paint Disney characters like "The Seven Dwarfs", Michelangelo's "Pieta" or even self-portraits as "Pogo the Clown". After his execution these paintings have become trendy collectors items. Film director John Waters and actor Johnny Depp are some celebrities who own his paintings. His art dealer was Rick Staton of Grindhouse Graphics.

On Friday, December 22, 1978, Gacy finally confessed to police that he killed at least thirty people and buried most of the remains of the victims beneath the crawl space of his house. His first killing took place in January, 1972. He further confessed that he would lure his victims into being handcuffed and then he would sexually assault them. To muffle the screams of his victims, he would stuff a sock or underwear into their mouths and kill them by pulling a rope or board against their throats, as he raped them. Gacy admitted to sometimes keeping the dead bodies under his bed or in the attic for several hours before eventually burying them in the crawl space.

During his trial in 1980, psychiatrists testified Gacy was not a multiple personality and he was judged sane. After that, he was convicted of all 33 deaths, making him the worst serial killer in U.S. History. He was put to death by lethal injection on May 10th, 1994 at the age of 52. Execution lasted 18 minutes after one of the IV lines clogged.





"The finest post-apocalyptic southern gothic mudpunk buddy-cop blow-out ever put to print." —Jeremy Robert Johnson

A Town Called **SUCKHOLE**

DAVID W. BARBEE



Published by Eraserhead Press

A TOWN CALLED SUCKHOLE: A NOVEL BY DAVID W. BARBEE

A Review by Bruce Priddy

While reading *A Town Called Suckhole*, I often wondered where I, as a proud citizen of Louisville, Kentucky, would fit into the books of the righteous residents of the once-was Dixie and their hated enemies, the Yankees. In the here –and-now, non-fictional America, Northerners consider my fair city the northern-most Southern outpost encroaching upon their borders; Southerners look at us much the same way, a Northern city on their borders. Perhaps this place in the twilight zone of American cultures gives me a unique prospect to review *A Town Called Suckhole*.

The eponymous Suckhole is the last bastion of humanity after an apocalyptic war between the Yankees and Dixie. The residents are every negative stereotype that has ever existed regarding Southerners. On the other hand, the now extinct Yankees were every negative stereotype held by every stereotypical Southerner, atheist, Muslim, homosexual, devil-worshipping abortionists. Of course, the war was the fault of the Yankees, who attacked the bucolic paradise that was Dixie. Facing defeat at the hands of Saint Hank and the Ku Klux Kommandos, the Yankees brought down nuclear fire upon the world.

The world is now populated with jackalopes, werepossums, acid-spewing mosquitos, clockwork-cyborg assassins and Frankenstein's-Monster-esque super-soldiers. And the stereotypes, the living-breathing, stereotypes. These range from the humored-groan-inducing to the headache-causing offensive, though only offensive in the way you know such stereotypes are true but hope the world-at-large understands this doesn't hold true for most Southerners. These stereotypes, humorous, offending or anywhere in-between, are not meant to be taken as serious representatives of the South, but rather to be laughed at, a coat-of-paint to make the already colorful residents of Suckhole even more so.

A Town Called Suckhole opens up on the eve of the Hell-Yeah Heritage Jamboree, an annual celebration of the founding of the town, an event that has all the shades of a redneck-retelling of the Aztec founding of Tenochtitlan. However, a murderer is on the loose, with a penitent for removing genitals. With all the stubbornness of his Amity Island counterpart, the mayor of Suckhole is determined the Jamboree go on despite the dangers. To find the killer, the sheriff and his deputy-son are forced to recruit the services of a near-fictitious resident of the surrounding swamps. Near-fictitious because this particular entity is a product of evolution and evolution is a Yankee lie. Opposing this unlikely team is a force that wishes to see Suckhole destroyed to make way for a New South.

When I first began reading *A Town Called Suckhole* I thought the aforementioned groan and headache inducing passages would be the book's death. The further in I got, the more and more I enjoyed the work. It is, simply put, fun manifest as the written word. The world Mr. Barbee builds and populates would not be out of place in one of the multi-apocalypses of Lethem's *Amnesia Moon*. Suckhole is a book you will find yourself reading over and over again, even as you read it your first time. Often, you will say "dafuq I just read?," re-reading lines and paragraphs, at first from disbelief, then from the sheer pleasure of experiencing the words again.

If you want an enjoyable, far-smarter-than-it-lets-on read, pick up *A Town Called Suckhole*. You will be far from disappointed.



Exorcism at The Last Hotel

By Karen Carter

February 14, 1899

Nine Spears, New Mexico Territory

Everyone in the town of Nine Spears knew about The Last Hotel and its clientele, strange men who came to town after dark every Saturday night from other towns wearing masks and disappearing before dawn. It was a well-known fact that no one ever talked about. Nobody ever saw Suzanne Starling or any of her four girls in the light of day. Starling sent a man who worked for her out to buy supplies. He bought provisions and picked up the mail if any came from the post office.

When Suzanne appeared at the mission school where one of the teachers, Julia Pooler, and the priest, Joaquin Nunez, were having afternoon tea, Julia couldn't help staring. It was the second time Julia had seen here and she looked different. She was covered from head to toe in a gauzy black shroud and carrying a lacy black parasol. She pulled the veil from around her stark white face.

"I need your help, Joaquin," she said. Julia was surprised that Suzanne had addressed the priest by his first name, not "padre" or "father".

"It's Ruby," she said. "She's dying."

"The poultice didn't work?" He asked her.

"No. She's having fever dreams. She says ..." Suzanne looked at Julia and then at Joaquin. "She says she sees the Black Angel at her bed."

Joaquin considered this in silence for a few moments. Julia knew that he was considering the consequences of this, not only for him as a priest, but more importantly, as a Navajo man.

"I'll see her," Joaquin said. "But only if Miss Pooler comes with me."

"Padre, I don't really think this is ..."

"Senora," he said. "There may yet be time to save Ruby but Miss Pooler must help me. Her father was a doctor."

Did Joaquin really know what kind of doctor her father had been? Julia didn't say anything.

"Joaquin," Suzanne protested, "A school teacher?"

Joaquin looked at Julia. Those black eyes penetrated her soul as though he could see into the deepest cellar of her heart. One never knew what he was thinking. "Julia will not talk about this with anyone, I assure you."

Julia nodded in agreement, still caught in the darkness of the priest's eyes.

"Surely you don't want folks to see you going in there," Suzanne said.

Joaquin answered for Julia. "She is assisting me."

"Why are you asking Father Nunez to come?" Julia asked her. "He is no doctor."

"But he is a medicine man. He is the best we have in Nine Spears."

"Officially," Joaquin told Julia, "I am administering Last Rites. I need to find Charlie and ask him to tell your aunt. He can tell her that you are with me on a professional call. We are attending a dying woman."

"And should she live?"

"Then you will have witnessed a miracle," Joaquin said.

Inside, The Last Hotel looked like any other hotel except for the red velvet drapes and the wallpaper patterns of red birds and fruit. The other three girls who worked there were sitting on a red velvet settee in the lobby. They all stared at Julia but none of them spoke. Julia adjusted her glasses and tried not to stare. None of the girls were over fifteen. They were dressed in feathers like children playing dress-up in their mothers' under clothes, their faces and lips painted with rouge and their hair done up in curls. Julia wondered if their mothers had any idea they were here or if they even cared.

They watched as Julia followed Joaquin upstairs. When they reached the top of the stairs, one of the girls burst into hysterical screams.

"It's cholera!" She cried, "We're all going to die!"

Suzanne turned on her like a snake. "It's not cholera, you simple-minded fool. You keep your mouth shut!" she hissed.

Joaquin and Julia followed her into one of the four rooms where she opened one of the doors and Julia recognized a slightly putrid odor. It was a smell that she remembered from her mother's deathbed, the smell of old blood and rotting meat. A dim candle burned on the table beside the bed and, as Julia's eyes adjusted to the darkness, she could see the sick girl in bed, shivering and babbling. When she looked up and saw Joaquin standing over her bed, her glassy eyes widened with terror and she screamed, "Get away from me, Lucifer! I know who you are!" Joaquin merely removed his hat and cassock and rolled up the sleeves of his white shirt.

"Ruby, shhh!" whispered Suzanne. "This is Father Nunez and Miss Pooler. They're here to help you."

"Let me help you," Joaquin said, taking the girl's hands in his. He turned to Suzanne. "Do you have a rubber syringe?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Get it for me. And bring a kettle of hot water and some blankets." He thought about this for a moment, then added, "Clean blankets."

Suzanne scurried out of the room like a spider, leaving Joaquin and Julia with the sick girl who was crying and repenting sins and begging Joaquin not to take her. The red flame danced across her pale face and

reflected in the tears in her eyes so that she appeared to be crying blood. Joaquin pulled up a chair and gripped her hand as if to ground her, to keep her from slipping into the outer darkness. "Stay with me," he pleaded.

"I don't want to die," the girl cried.

"You're not dying," Julia whispered. "You're going to get better and live a long, full life." She was looking at Joaquin, ignoring the hopelessness in his black, soulless eyes. "You'll meet a handsome stranger," she continued, like a fortuneteller in a tearoom. "A man who will love you ... take care of you. Nobody will ever do these things to you again. You are a child of God. God wants to heal you." As she drew closer to the girl, Julia was horrified to see that the child was no older than Joaquin's nephew, Charlie. This was a prepubescent girl whose body had not fully developed. "What's the matter with her?" she whispered to Joaquin.

"She took poison to abort her pregnancy," he whispered. "The remains of the dead child are still inside her, festering and rotting. Unless she can rid her body of this, she will die of poisoning of the blood."

"She's so ... young. I didn't know they were children."

"It sickens the stomach, doesn't it? There are real monsters in this world, Miss Pooler. This one is most popular because of her age." He leaned close to the girl. "Listen to me, *Mejia*. I want to help you but you have to trust me. I am not one of those men who hurts you."

The girl only stared at him but at least, she was no longer crying. Joaquin asked Julia to comfort the girl while he examined her. Julia dabbed at her brow with her handkerchief while Joaquin pulled back the patchwork quilt and placed his hand on her abdomen.

"What are you going to do?" Julia asked him.

"Irrigate the womb."

"Have you done this before?"

Joaquin didn't reply. Of course he had done it before. Why else would Suzanne Starling have gone to him? There was so much about the priest Julia didn't know and didn't want to know. When Suzanne returned with the things he had asked for, Joaquin asked her to leave them. Reluctantly, she turned and closed the door behind her.

Joaquin wrapped the blankets around the girl's thin shoulders to bring on a sweat. He then filled the syringe with hot water. The girl moaned when he lifted her flannel nightgown. "I may need you to hold her," he told Julia.

The girl cried out when he touched her but Julia kept smoothing her hair and talking to her. The girl allowed the priest to part her legs. Julia felt a wave of nausea but tried to fight it as she kept her eyes on Joaquin, framed between the girl's bony knees. He looked up at her and she saw the fire reflecting in his eyes and felt something so cold and terrible that she quickly turned away.

"Try to get her to relax," he told her.

Julia tried to think of a story to tell her. She could only think of Romeo and Juliet. In Julia's version of Shakespeare, Romeo was the son of a shepherd and Juliet was the daughter of a wealthy cattle baron. Joaquin sat on the edge of the bed, listening as they waited for nature to take its course. One hour later, the contractions still had not started. Joaquin repeated the procedure while massaging the girl's pelvis as Julia changed the ending of the story to give it a happy ending.

The awaited contractions began and soon the girl began to expel the putrid contents of her womb. In the light of the flickering candles, dark red globules looked like precious gemstones, an offering to the god-protector of lost children. The rancid odor filled the room like a toxic gas. Julia began to heave. Blackbirds circled the wallpaper, doves in the negative spaces. The feverish girl thought they were swarming around her



SIX DEGREES

JENNIFER WORD

I'm here in the police station about to make a report. I didn't go anywhere else before coming here. They're making me wait. They didn't ask me what it was about; I just told them I needed to report something.

"*A crime?*"

"Yes."

I didn't know how to say the actual words, so they told me to wait here, until an officer is free to take my statement. In the meantime, the sergeant at the desk tells me there's a vending machine down the hall, so I can get myself a soda while I wait. He smiles at me, but I just look away. He doesn't know what I saw tonight, doesn't know how *I feel*.

Funny how the mind works after a trauma; little things bring me back. As I near the soda machine, I feel a slight drop in temperature. I raise my hand, palm flat, and lay it on the cold plastic casing. It makes me think of how the armrest felt beneath my arm, in his car. That was before he pulled over and got out, and...

Someone behind me drops something. It hits the floor with a light fwap, but I hear the sound of twigs breaking as a body is dragged through dead grass. I hear a light tap-tap-tapping of someone's shoes. They're behind me, waiting impatiently, but I haven't prepared my change. The tapping of their foot sounds like the popping of gravel under the weight of a dragged body. I heard that tonight, too.

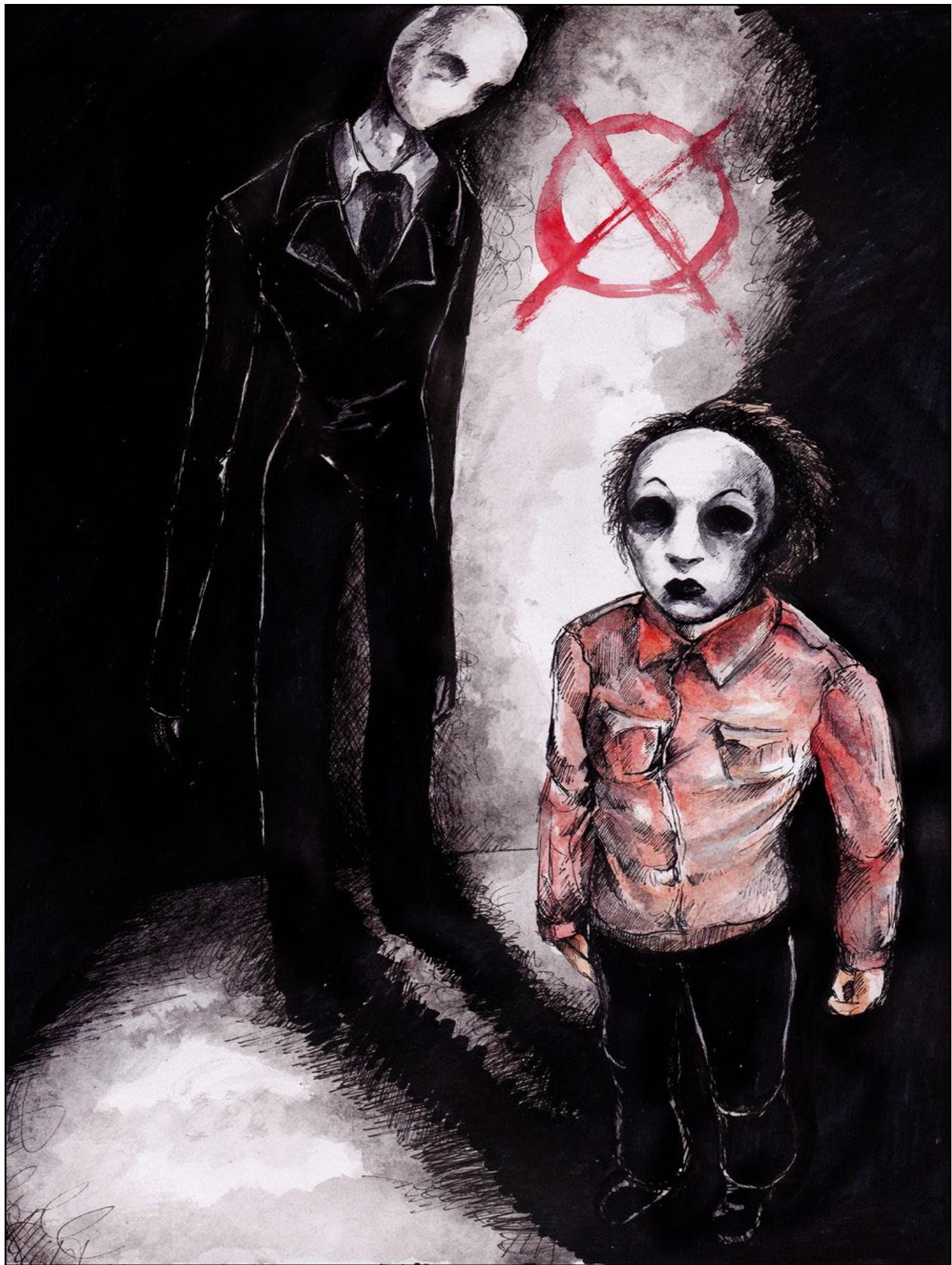
I let them go in front of me and pull loose change from the bottom of my purse; three quarters. The person in front of me—a man—gets his drink and leaves, but not before throwing me a look of annoyance. His eyes quickly flit to my chest then back up again. He smiles, but all I see is a sneer. He could be just as capable of committing the crime I witnessed tonight. He *could*.

The mind grasps onto inane thoughts in the wake of a trauma, doesn't it? Behind me, I hear the desk sergeant call my name, telling me they are ready to take my statement now, but I barely hear him. I'm frozen in place, staring at the three coins in my hand, lost in the oddest thought. They say every person on the planet is only separated from the next by six degrees. If that is true, we have all touched evil without even knowing.

I look at the coins in my hand, and can't help but wonder. Six degrees of separation; the odds are slight, but, perhaps one of these quarters was once in the hands of a thief, a wife beater, a murderer...

Or perhaps my rapist.

The Gentle Mouth of Fe



ear: A Gallery by Wolvaria













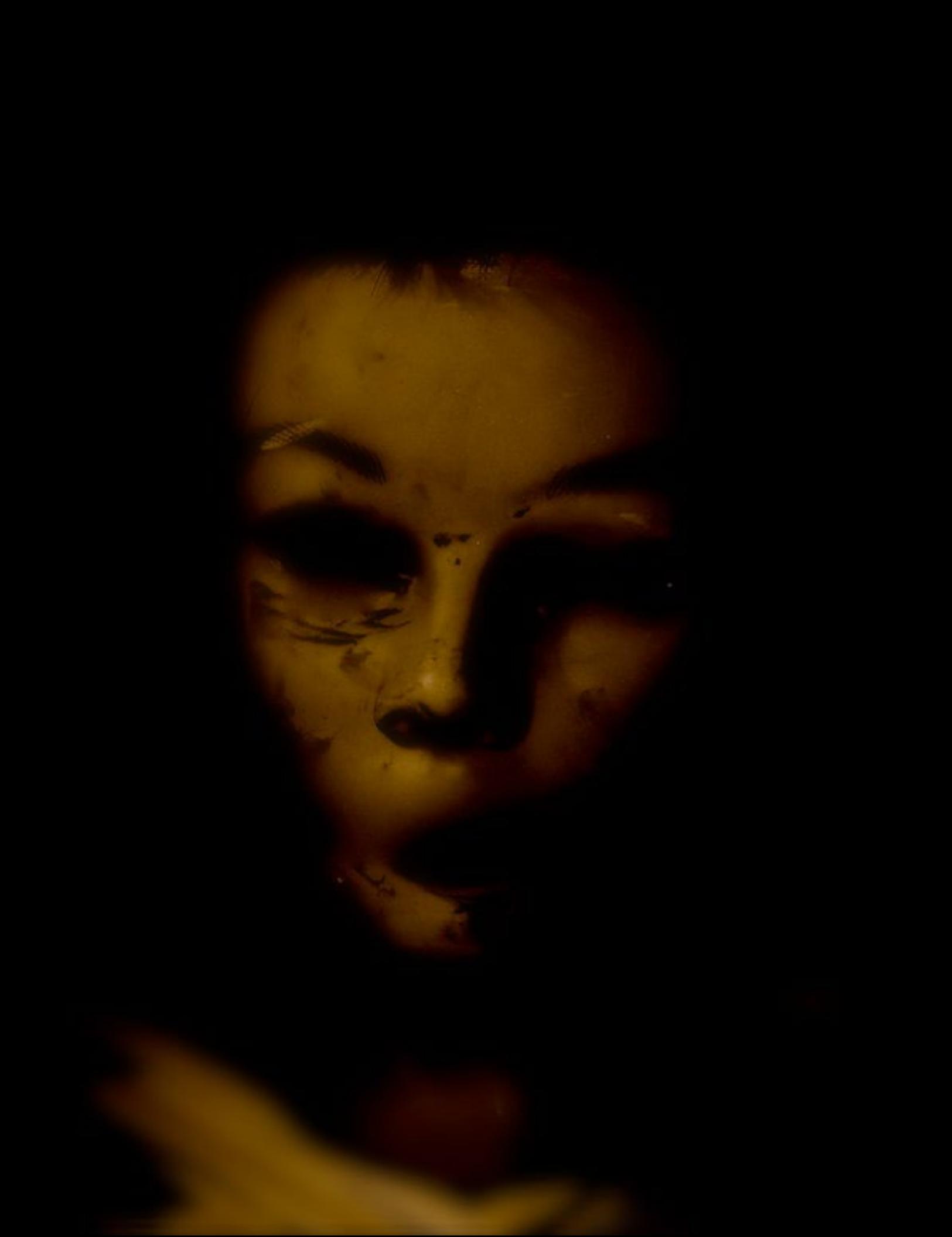
Taper Brittany Warren

Alleviate,
fierce stories of reduction
torrid heartbeat screamer,
derivative of none.

Reduce,
movement of the loose soul
feelings,
the weak shoelace manipulation.

Work the bridge blatant,
wheeze the weak callous
touch no one.

Torment,
the crunch of silence
porous pudding statement,
truth in germs outlasts
commitment to dreaming.



I MISS MY TONSIL OLLITH

BY GABINO IGLESIAS

The singing started way before the coughing. A wonderful sound akin to the song of a lonely, jazzy whale had invaded my skull a few weeks before my throat started feeling funny. There was no way for me to know the two things were related. You see, the songs I heard in my head were always soothing. They usually helped me mellow out whenever I was at the office and wanted to stab someone in the neck with a pen. I cared not whether the sound came from my brain, angels or from a tooth that had somehow turned into a radio. The skull music made me happy. Then came the coughing.

There was something stuck in my throat. I could feel it there, like a small pebble in my shoe. Coughing didn't help much, so one night I decided to take a look in the mirror. What I saw looked like a grain of rice half buried in my right tonsil. The white thing announced its presence every time I swallowed, so it had to come out. Using my finger, I dislodged the tiny morsel and spat it into my hand. Always curious, I brought it up to my nose. It smelled like a small chunk of Camembert dipped in pus.

Like any modern hypochondriac, I turned to my computer. Two hours later I knew almost everything there is to know about tonsiloliths. Convinced that the tonsil stone was no more than an accumulation of food particles and bacteria that had formed in one of the multiple crevices on my tonsils, I decided to get rid of it and call it a day.

I wrapped the yellowish pellet in toilet paper and walked to the toilet. The tiny thing in my fist screamed. I jumped back, dropped the bundle of paper, and smacked my head on the towel bar. The screaming stopped and a second later the thing started mumbling from inside its papery cocoon. I pushed the bundle with my foot and the tonsilolith rolled out. It coughed a few times before speaking.

"Where you just about to get rid of me? After all we've been through?" it said in a very feminine voice.

For the first time in my life, I was speechless. Finally, I remembered to inhale and the oxygen helped me snap out of it.

“I’m...I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were alive.”

“Seriously? You even nod your fucking head every time I sing! What, did you think the ghost of Sarah Vaughn had moved into your skull?”

“No! I just didn’t know where the songs came from. I’m sorry.”

To make things right, I picked my tonsilolith off the floor and placed it next to the sink. I asked it if it had a name. Dorothea, it said in a much sweeter voice now that it was no longer on the floor. A few hours later, the first rays of a new day came through the bathroom window and found Dorothea and I still talking.

She loved jazz, brisket, the sound of windblown leaves scraping against the asphalt, and cheesy horror movies. We were a match made in heaven. With every word, every promise, every kiss, my soul wrapped itself tighter and tighter around Dorothea’s small, round body.

The next few days went by in a blissful haze. Sweet Dorothea and I concocted a plan to murder my wife and elope together. However, a small mistake on my part shattered all our dreams.

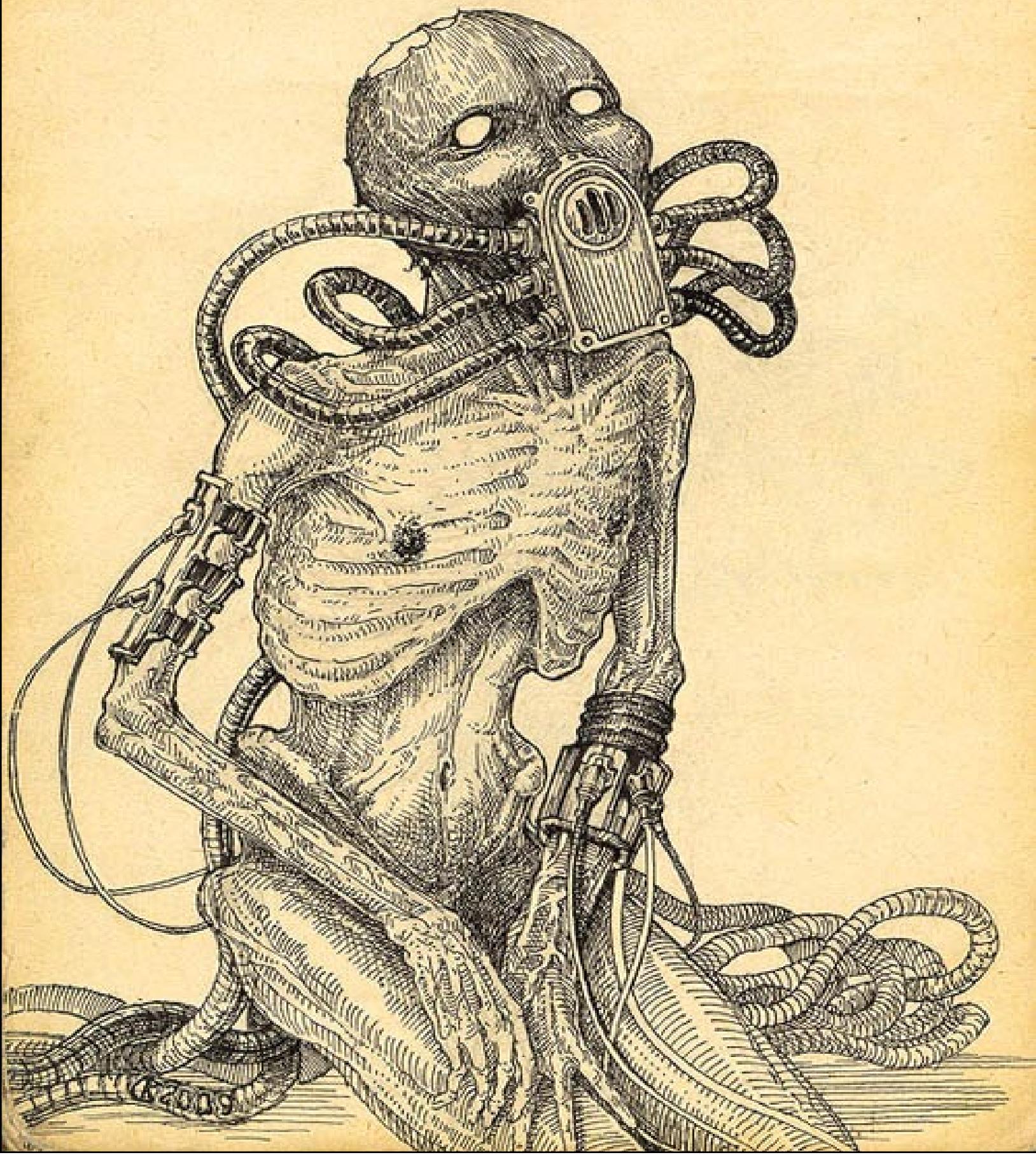
My wife, Kryslyn, had repeatedly mentioned I was spending an inordinate amount of time in the bathroom. She was right: I kept Dorothea comfortably nestled in a bed of soft tissues by the side of the sink.

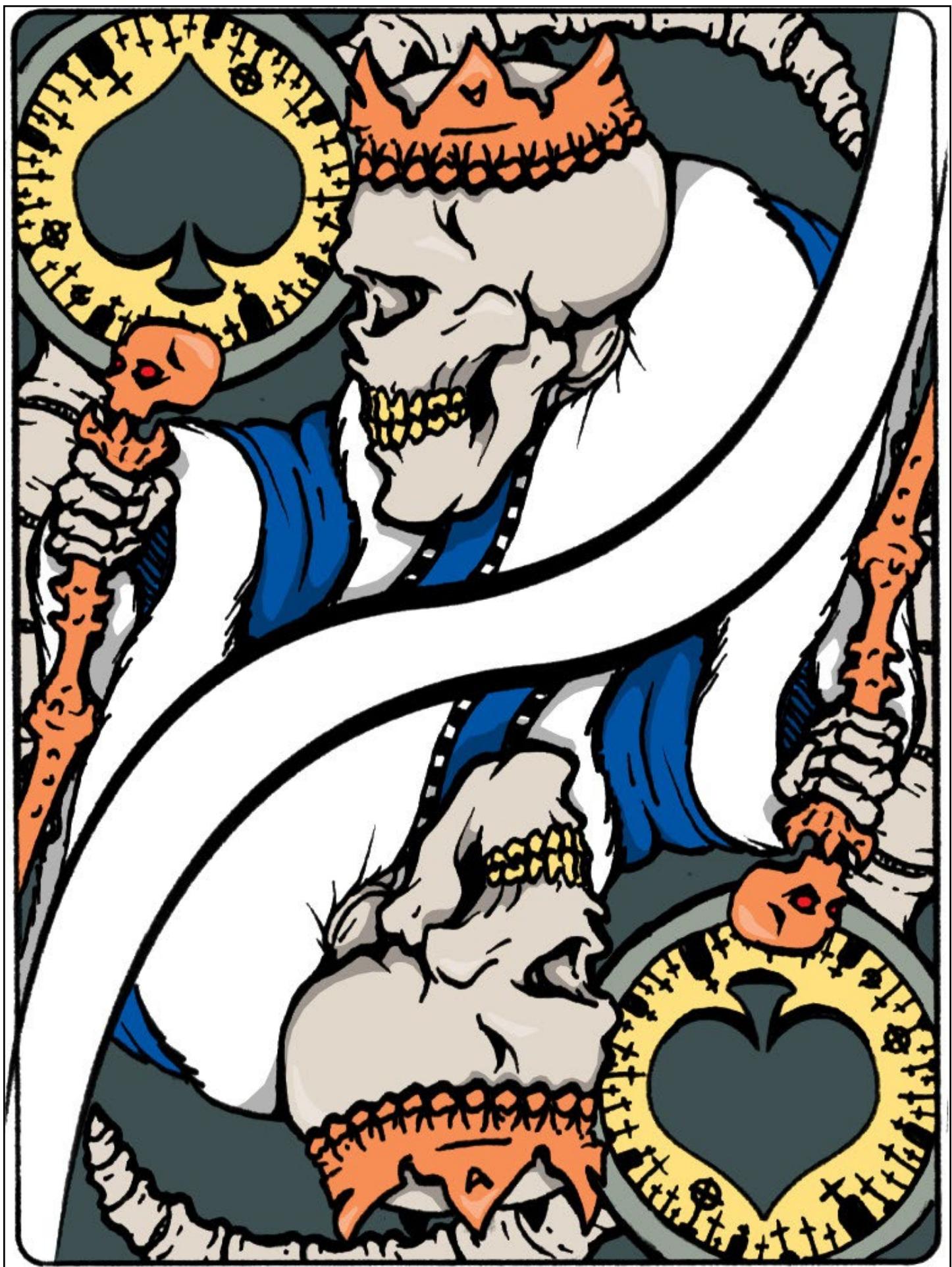
Besides an awful name, my wife also had a voice somewhere between a distorted ambulance siren and the screech of a dolphin getting anally raped with a machete. Although she said nothing, I knew she feared I was having an affair with the sink. Her trust in me had been shaky since the time she caught me humping the refrigerator. That’s why I wasn’t exactly surprised when I came home from work one day and found Dorothea gone.

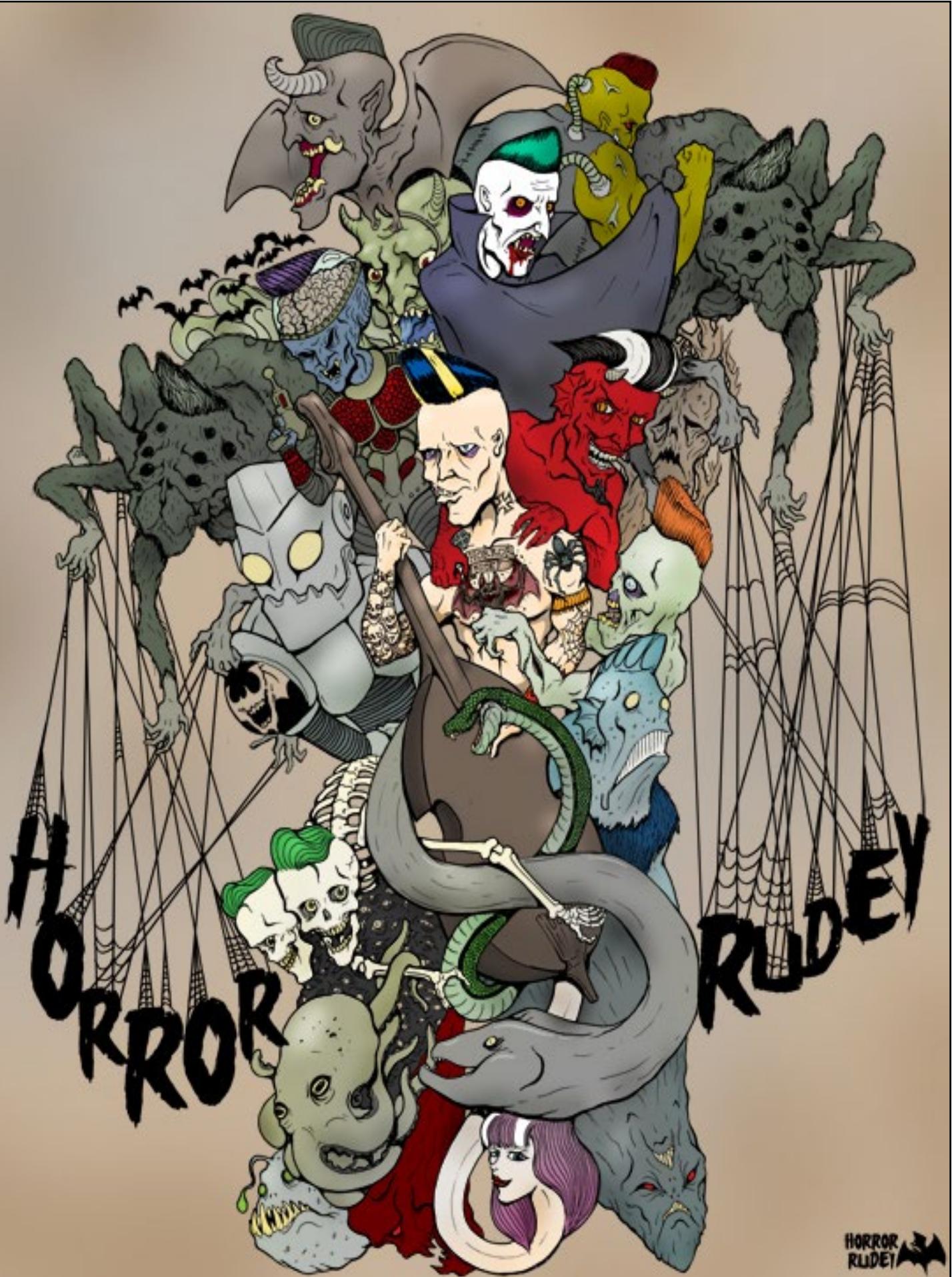
“I have no idea what you were doing in that bathroom,” wailed Kryslyn. “Whatever you had in there is gone. What could be flushed was flushed and I burned the rest.”

Instead of killing her then and there, I decided to wait.

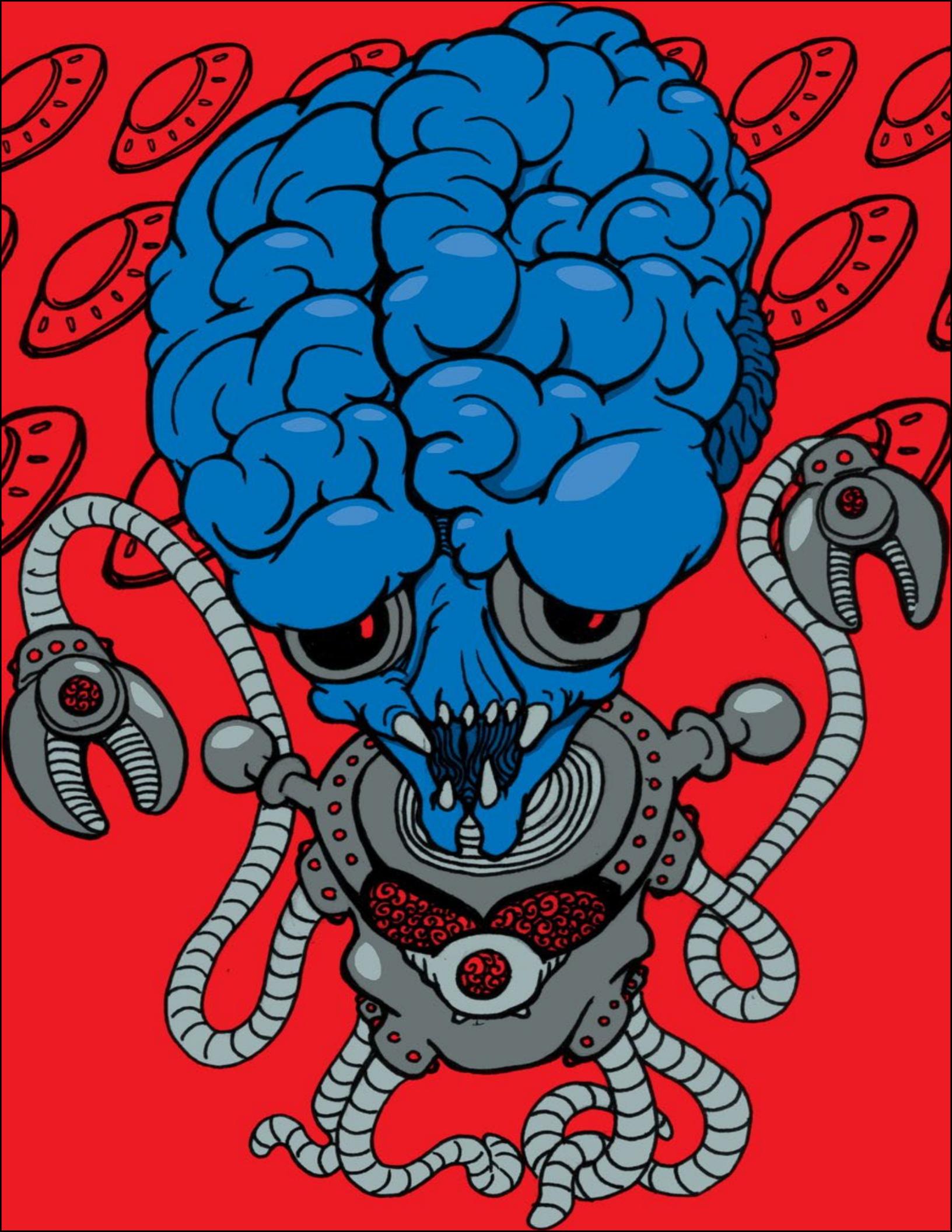
Now my nights are spent sitting next to the toilet. Dorothea was brilliant and resourceful. I know she’ll come back to me. I know my head will once again be filled with her beautiful songs. When she comes back, we’ll take care of Kryslyn together. Then I’ll stop brushing my teeth and we’ll try to start a family far, far away from here.







<http://horrorruudey.deviantart.com/>















‘Til Death Do Us Part

William Cook

Hugo sat watching the late night re-runs. His eyes were glazed and the stark light from the television made his flesh look anemic as he slumped in the lounge-chair. He looked at the clock on the wall and rubbed his tired eyes, 2.30 am. Hugo stifled a yawn and looked at his wife who was propped up with cushions in the centre of the couch. Her eyes rolled in the back of her head and an audible snore came from her inflamed nostrils perched above the duct-tape covering her mouth.

Hugo looked back at the 20/20 program with renewed interest as a story came on about a local surgeon who had successfully separated conjoined twins. The gory footage of the operation showed the surgeon meticulously separating the cranial flesh, bone and then the blood vessels and other viscera surrounding the two exposed brains. Mary-Beth murmured as Hugo turned the volume up. He glanced back over at her and noticed the blood had now coagulated at the end of her bloody limbs where he had crudely cauterised the wounds.

The story continued as the journalist interviewed the surgeon after the operation in his opulent downtown office. Hugo was sure he had seen the surgeon before somewhere. He realized that the medical insurance company he had worked with for the last two decades probably had the good doctor on their books. Hell, he'd probably even sold the surgeon some expensive public liability insurance. That must be it, Hugo concluded and looked back at Mary-Beth again. He had tried to dress her in her own clothes but had settled for an old bathrobe that kept her warm enough. He had cut the sleeves off to stop the blood soaking into the material where her arms had once joined her shoulders. He envied the skill of the surgeon but was happy he had effectively removed Mary-Beth's limbs without losing her during the operation.

Hugo had been spending a lot of time recently in the large basement of their ample house. He had taken annual leave and had used the three-month vacation to set a few things straight in his otherwise mediocre existence. He had been awake four nights straight and was finally ready for sleep now that the operation had succeeded and he knew he would never lose Mary-Beth again.

He stood and stretched his tired body, making his way to the bathroom to piss and brush his teeth. He looked in the mirror and saw a stranger looking back at him. Short but messy black hair. White, pasty complexion; black rings circling his staring eyes beneath expensive glasses. He looked gaunt and far from the tanned, healthy, young executive, he had been a month ago. He took the spectacles and placed them on the edge of the sink as he brushed his teeth.

Hugo, now dressed for bed, went back to the lounge to kiss Mary-Beth good night. He didn't notice the petrified look of fear in her eyes or the shivering of her body as it passed through the final stages of shock. He kissed her gently on her clammy brow and whispered, "Love you Mary-Beth, beautiful wife. I love you forever." With that he turned and made his way down the hall to the bedroom, failing to notice that his once beautiful wife had toppled sideways, before landing on the plush rug in front of the couch, head first.

Hugo stayed awake for a while, waiting for sleep to take him away to a dark place. He thought about Mary-Beth and couldn't help feeling a deep anger and resentment at the way she had deceived him. He had found out that she was planning to leave him through a mutual friend that worked at the office. A night out with the guys from work led to drunken conversations and then one of them had told Hugo in no uncertain terms

that Mary-Beth was ‘fucking one of the other reps from the competing Medical Insurance group across town.’ Hugo dismissed it as rumor at first. After all, they had only been married six months and that kind of thing only happened to other people after years of marriage. However, he had been wrong. As soon as he could, he checked her phone while she was out and found the revelatory text messages from STEVE.

Hugo confronted Mary-Beth and she bluntly told him that she wanted to move out of their new house and that she was going to seek an annulment, failing that, a divorce. He hadn’t handled the news well, maniacally reciting their wedding vows as she hurriedly packed her bags. She ignored him as he continued to plead with her, asking her “why?” The final straw had been when she had dragged her suitcase down the steps to the front door, turned and told him that she had never loved him. That she had been banging STEVE since their engagement party and that STEVE was twice the man Hugo would ever be.

Hugo decided that she would not leave him. Mary-Beth was his wife, no-one else’s and he would be damned if he was going to let her get away from him so easily. He would sort STEVE out later.

Sleep hit Hugo hard. The blackness came but with it marched the nightmares. He dreamed of Mary-Beth. Flashes of her beautiful smile, slow motion visions of her curvaceous body twisting seductively, and then torrents of blood flooded his thoughts. He saw Mary-Beth bound to the workbench in the basement, the fluorescent light above illuminating her naked body, bound with ratchet tie-downs. He could see the rise and fall of her breast slow, with the effect of the strong sedative he had given her. Hugo started to sweat profusely in his sleep as the dream replayed what he did next to Mary-Beth. He remembered the intoxicated numbness he felt as he fired the Black ‘n’ Decker electric handsaw to life. He held the vibrating saw with one hand and took a giant swig of the expensive cognac he held in the other. He remembers putting the bottle down slowly as if trying to delay what would come next and then, it was as if he fell into a dream, a very bad dream, as he began to remove Mary-Beth’s thin limbs one by one. Dark blood gushed from the fresh wounds as if propelled by a strong wind, covering Hugo and the workshop, in a spraying rain of warm fluid and flesh.

He briefly worried about electrocution but recalled plugging the saw into a transformer before he began. He also recalled the tension in Mary-Beth’s body as the angry saw bit into her soft flesh. He watched her smooth skin turn from mocha to chalk as her body slipped into shock. As he put the saw down, Hugo felt the first wave of nausea hit him and he threw up violently on the floor as he picked up the glowing iron resting on the shelf above the workbench. He forced himself to push it hard on the bloodied stump of her shoulder, where once her arm had been. He threw-up again as her flesh sizzled and popped as the crude but effective method cauterised Mary-Beth’s horrible wounds. One by one, he completed the process and with a final application of antiseptic cream and bandages, Hugo finished the task and woke from his nightmare.

He sat up in bed trembling as he tried to convince himself the whole thing had been an elaborate nightmare. But he knew it wasn’t. He got out of bed and made his way into the lounge, finding Mary-Beth facedown in the shag-pile rug. He quickly, but gently, picked her up and took her back to the bedroom, laying her carefully on her side of the bed, before climbing in behind her and falling into a deep sleep. This time, he dreamed a different dream than before.

Days passed and Hugo knew he had to do something. Mary-Beth was no longer drinking the pureed food that he had been giving her through a tube. She felt cold and he began to panic. “I won’t lose you again my love,” he repeated to her as he lay by her side on the bed and stroked her delicate features. “I won’t ever lose you again.”

The seed of an idea began to germinate in his mind as he paced the basement that night. The basement was as clean as the day they moved in. He had spent the better part of a week cleaning it from top to bottom. A ten-litre pail of disinfectant and another of bleach were used to mop down every surface. He had carefully wrapped Mary-Beth’s limbs in newspaper before binding them with masking tape. The next day he spent the

morning sweeping fall leaves into a pile in the middle of the backyard.

As soon as night fell, he poured an accelerant on the leaves and stoked the pile with various pieces of timber and flammable rubbish he had found around the house. He placed the wrapped limbs carefully in the centre of the pyre and struck a match. The flames rose high into the air and he was sure he could hear Mary-Beth's screams as the fire crackled and burned ferociously.

Hugo headed back inside and took Mary-Beth down from her perch in front of the window overlooking the back lawn. A faint smell emanated from her and he realized she had relieved herself. He cleaned her up in the bathtub, careful not to let her slip under the murky water. He towelled her dry and slipped the wedding ring on a gold chain over her bowed head, he had made sure he salvaged it from her hand before he got rid of her useless limbs in the fire. He sprayed her with some deodorant, failing to suppress his disgust as he noticed she was still leaking from various wounds and her skin had the color and sheen of an avocado. He wrapped her in a clean towel, knowing what he had to do now.

Hugo put her back to bed and went downstairs to the garage. He backed the shiny-black BMW out of the garage and headed downtown. It had been easy enough to find out the surgeon's work address, all Hugo had to do was have a quick look online and he had all the contact details he needed to track him down. He spent the following week driving back and forth, spending hours monitoring the surgeon's movements outside the plush downtown office where he worked while not in surgery.

Philip Binder Snr, MD was on the homestretch of a successful career in Paediatric neurosurgery and was looking forward to a very comfortable retirement. The last successful operation he'd performed on the Chinese conjoined twins had been the crowning glory of a forty-year run as the principal Neuro-Surgeon at the Portvale Municipal Hospital. He had won various accolades and awards for his pioneering work in the field and was considered by many to be the best.

Hugo had done his research, spending days in the library reading the various publications written by and concerning the surgeon. Hundreds of different medical news archives provided the background of the man via Google and the Internet. The most important part of Hugo's research was the 20/20 story that he'd recorded, when it replayed a few days after the initial broadcast. He'd sit there at night trying to battle his insomnia by watching the feature story repeatedly. Hugo knew exactly what he needed to do so nobody would ever take Mary-Beth away from him again and the good doctor would be the one to help him achieve his goal.

Hugo tried not to notice the slightly rancid perfume as he wrapped Mary-Beth in a blanket and placed her in the boot of the BMW. He swallowed and took a breath of the afternoon air as he opened the garage doors and let sunlight flood in. He tried not to think too much about the damp dark stain on his shirt-sleeve, where he had cradled Mary-Beth before wrapping her, as he gingerly brushed some residual flesh from his arm. He went to the rear of the garage and took down the Mossberg shotgun from the gun rack mounted above the workbench. It had been a wedding gift from Mary-Beth's father along with big plans to go hunting in the fall. Hugo had never used it before and lamented the fact that he would never be going hunting with his father-in-law now. He packed the two boxes of shells that came with the gift into an overnight bag and wrapped another blanket around the Shotgun, before placing them both in the boot next to Mary-Beth. "I love you my darling," Hugo said, as he gently closed the boot.

Hugo sat in the car with the window down as the end of the day approached. The heat from the sun made the interior of the car rank with the smell of purification but Hugo remained focussed on the mission ahead. He watched the surgeon's staff leave the small but exclusive office on the town-belt, only a short walk away from the Municipal Hospital. As the last staff member left, Hugo backed the car up to the side exit of the

office block and turned the engine off.

He cradled Mary-Beth in one arm and with the other, levelled the shotgun at the doorway as Binder opened the door to leave work. The look of shock on the surgeon's face propelled Hugo forward, bundling the older man back into his office and locking the door behind him. Hugo placed Mary-Beth upright in a chair in the Surgeon's waiting room and the blanket fell away, taking with it most of the decomposed flesh from her face. "I want you to meet Mary-Beth, doc," said Hugo with a too-large smile.

Hugo lay naked on the floor of the office and motioned with the shotgun for the surgeon to approach with his surgical tool kit. Mary-Beth lay beside Hugo naked also. Binder Snr's hands trembled as he removed various instruments: scalpel, sutures, forceps, and needles, laying them on a cloth next to Mary-Beth's decomposing corpse. Hugo smiled up from the floor where he lay. "You know what to do Doctor – local anaesthetic first, right?" The surgeon shook his head, still reeling in shock at what was happening in his office. He considered running but looked in Hugo's crazed eyes and knew the man was completely insane. He knew if he did not do exactly what the thin man said, he would be very dead.

His fingers shook with fear as the muzzle of the shotgun jabbed his mid-section, encouraging him to administer the anaesthetic with a syringe into various junctures along Hugo's right side, from the ribs down to the hip.

"Where you goin' doc?" slurred Hugo, as Binder Snr. rose to his feet slowly.

"I need to get some antiseptic wipes," said the surgeon as he made his way to his desk and removed the sterile wipes from a glass wall cabinet behind his leather chair. He looked over his shoulder briefly and saw Hugo grinning at him from the office floor, holding the shotgun at arm's length, pointing directly at the surgeon's head. As he turned back to the bizarre prospect in front of him, the surgeon pressed the small record button on the remote sitting on the edge of his desk. He knew the office security camera would be whirring into life and would at least capture what was happening, even though he felt that he might not get to see the footage or enjoy his coming retirement.

The Senior Investigating Officer leaned over and puked into the waste-paper bin next to his desk. The other officers looked away in disgust as the security camera footage replayed the grim surgery. "I just kept doing what he told me to do," explained the surgeon, choking back tears. The monitor buzzed with the low-res footage as the bizarre scene showed the surgeon, hunched over the bodies of Hugo and Mary-Beth.

The sound was barely audible apart from an occasional scream from Hugo, as the Surgeon cut and clamped, sutured and stitched. The officers watched as the surgeon rose quickly from the floor, scrabbling out of camera range to reveal the torso of Mary-Beth joined just above Hugo's hip with a blackened wound laced with tight stitches. Hugo's head rolled back and forth and a blood curdling scream emanated from the computer monitor, flashes of white exploded from the barrel of the shotgun as he fired wildly around the small office, writhing on the floor. The officers continued to watch the footage in silence, as Hugo appeared to lose consciousness. Nothing stirred onscreen and then the sweat-soaked back of the surgeon appeared and bent down over Hugo and Mary-Beth's prone forms.

"I'm administering adrenaline and more painkillers at this point," explained Binder Snr MD, wiping sweat from his forehead with a bloodied handkerchief.

The footage kept playing, the surgeon clearly recoiling from the now-conscious Hugo who had the shotgun levelled at the surgeon's bald head.

"I should've taken that damn rifle off him when I had the chance," sobbed the surgeon. One of the

officers patted him on the shoulder and reassured him that he ‘did all he could’ve done.’ Binder Snr MD looked far from reassured, as the camera footage continued.

Hugo tried to get to his feet and fell sideways with the dead weight of Mary-Beth’s attached torso. His face opened with obvious pain a high-pitched scream exploded from the monitor speakers. He dropped the shotgun on the floor, a flash erupting from the muzzle as it discharged involuntarily. The surgeon quickly darted out of camera range once again.

“This time I ran. I ran out of there as fast as I could and called you guys straight away.”

“You did the right thing sir,” said the grim-faced Senior Investigating Officer.

The younger officers watched open-mouthed as the monitor now showed Hugo holding himself up on the edge of the surgeon’s desk, his arm wrapped around Mary-Beth’s naked torso, blood leaking profusely down his thigh from the now-gaping wound which had split open. Hugo seemed to be talking to his grim appendage, kissing the decomposed face, wiping the rancid flesh from its lips. He was also visibly paler, as he started to slip in the dark pool of blood at his feet.

He let go of Mary-Beth to steady himself and the wound visibly split, her limp body tearing away in a spray of blood as the stitches burst where they joined the bodies. As Hugo tried to regain his footing, Mary-Beth’s body seemed to twitch and then the limb-less corpse reared up. Hugo’s face twisted with terror as he tried to recoil from the swinging corpse attached to his thin frame. Mary-Beth appeared to launch herself at Hugo, the skeletal face animated visibly in rage, black rotting hole of a mouth stretched wide, teeth snapping at his neck.

Hugo collapsed on the floor in the middle of the black pool of blood, the thrashing corpse on top of him, their separate bodies barely discernable now, both covered in slick gore.

Two more of the younger officers tried to choke back vomit as they continued to stare numbly at the screen. An arm flailed underneath the heaving mass of flesh and blood, then a thin shiny sliver of steel appeared from under the desk, clasped in Hugo’s clenched fist. The surgeon’s scalpel slashed into the back of the his wife’s corpse, hacking and cutting at the mutilated wound that half-joined the two together. As the bodies separated with each slicing cut and Hugo pushed the dismembered corpse away from his own eviscerated body, the camera faltered and started to judder as the recording ended.

“What the fuck just happened?” asked the Senior Officer, a shocked look on his face that offered no hope of any understanding. The surgeon sat in his chair, sweaty bald head in his bloodied hands. Some of the other officers excused themselves and left the office, while the remaining few shuffled uncomfortably and looked at each other for an answer. The coroner, who had been watching proceedings impassively from the doorway, took two steps forwards and dropped the autopsy report on the Senior Officer’s cluttered desk. “Two deaths, one by homicide, one by misadventure. The female’s time of death – at least one month before the male’s. Male neck wounds unexplained, although clearly bite marks correspond with the female dental records and the footage you have just witnessed.”

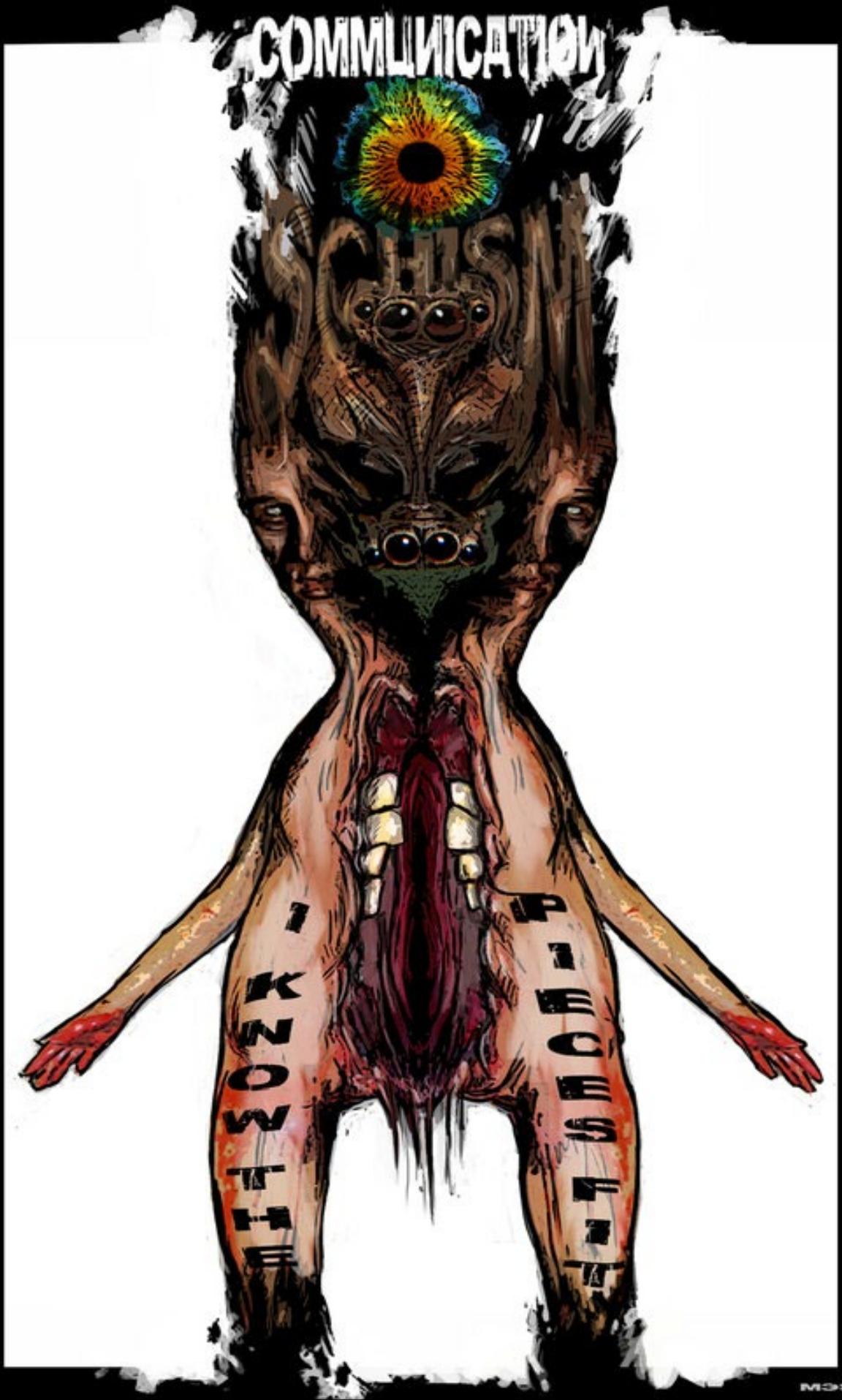
“How the hell am I gonna write this one up?” asked the Senior Officer to no-one in particular, shaking his head, hypnotised by the folder on the desk in front of him. He picked up the coroner’s report and looked at the folder blankly. He placed it back on his desk amidst the surrounding clutter of forms, case files and reference books, then placed his hand on top of it as if he was about to swear on the good book. The coroner leaned across the desk, picking up one of the rubber stamps heaped in a basket next to the ‘in-and-out’ trays overflowing with paper. He rolled the stamp in the red inkpad next to the phone and bought the stamp down hard on the cover of the report.

‘CASE CLOSED,’ declared the imprint, now emblazoned diagonally across the cardboard folder. The

Officer picked up the folder, waving the remaining officers from the office before crossing the room to the filing cabinet. He opened the bottom drawer and filed the report at the back of the other copious files marked ‘Case Closed.’ Slowly shaking his head, he repeated, “Case closed,” as he took the half empty bottle of scotch from another drawer, unscrewed the cap and drank half of its contents in a single mouthful, not giving a fuck if anyone saw him do it.







OSCEW

A SEARING PAIN

GRANT WAMACK

Norris watched in silent awe and outright disgust.

The fly fell to the floor, barely making a sound.

Norris, his eyes clouded over by the spectacle of life and death that was playing out in his living room.

Its small black body convulsed in its final moments of life, wings beating frantically against the oak floor again and again, matching the rhythm of Norris' heart, beat for beat. Oblivious to his surroundings; only he and the fly existed for now, dancing in limbo.

Time passed and with it, life.

After he flushed the fly's limp body down the toilet, a searing pain flared up deep inside his forehead. Only a headache, nothing more he told himself over and over like a silent mantra.

The pressure grew as the day wore on. Norris dug inside the bathroom cabinet and pulled out a small white bottle. He unscrewed the cap and fished out a couple of pink pills.

Norris turned on the faucet and let the water flow into his cupped palms. He splashed the water down his dry mouth and swallowed the pills.

They'll work eventually, he told himself, they have to.

Norris woke up, bleary-eyed, relieved to be free of the heavy pressure that weighed him down earlier. At least that was one thing he didn't have to put up with today. He still had to go to work and type up an ever growing stack of real estate forms that sat in his small cramped office.

He sighed.

For years he had been loyal to the company, bypassing offers from others in hopes of a promotion. Stick it out, his father's voice grunted inside his head.

He stuck it out, but somehow he still remained stuck at the bottom rung, barely hanging on. He considered moving onto a new company, but he feared it wouldn't work out. Especially in these hard economic times where job security was paramount.

Norris inspected himself in front of the mirror and tightened his tie. Professional. That's how he viewed himself. Why do I even bother, he thought. Looking like a professional didn't make you one. You had to show that you had it. That special gift, that got get 'em attitude. He believed that wholeheartedly, never doing otherwise. Belief was all he had, all he could hold onto.

Traffic was terrible. Cars bunched together, side by side. Stuck behind a slow moving garbage truck, the putrid smell somehow lingered inside his car and made him nauseous, ready to puke this morning's breakfast bagel.

Norris closed his nostrils and breathed in through his mouth. Cursing under his breath, he swerved in between cars. He swung into a parking space, put the car into park, and took a deep breath.

Work was slow and tedious. Terri, his manager, kept sneaking up behind him to look over his work. Norris tried his best to ignore her, but it failed to make any difference. Despite this, she roamed behind him like a pest. It irritated him to no end and his concentration began to falter.

He typed faster, sweat running down his neck in rivulets, and tried to push back the silence with his frantic battering of the keyboard. The longer she idled, the more coals were added to the fire, threatening to ignite. His senses must have improved tenfold because he could hear her move her dry lips over all the office sounds. They sounded like two sheets of sandpaper rubbing up against one another.

"Enough is fucking enough," he muttered.

He swiveled around in his chair ready to confront her, but she had left leaving behind the smell of her cheap perfume. Norris turned back to his computer with a sigh and wiped the sweat off his forehead.

That night he cooked dinner for one.

Norris sipped his flat pop and bit into his stale TV. dinner. He looked away from the TV. for a moment and glanced at the empty seats next to him.

Sometimes he would go to a bar and convince a woman to come over, but something would always go wrong. He would slur his words and say the wrong thing or he would just sit there oblivious to a woman's advances. Angry or bored, they would leave him with his thoughts and thoughts were never enough.

Never.

When Norris awoke from a dreamless sleep, he knew today wouldn't be any different from the last. Life was like a rerun, boring season after boring season.

Traffic moved at a snail's pace, inch by agonizing inch. The sounds of nature soundtrack filled his car, soothing his mind and calming his silent fury. It took him out of the city, away from all the bullshit, and into the woods. He was back in his secluded cabin, relaxing and unfurling inside his cocoon of solitude.

Someone's horn snapped him out of his daydream. His heart leaped. The light turned green but he was at a standstill. In the rearview mirror, he could see a bald sweaty man worked up, yelling incomprehensively.

Fear slowly crept up his spine. Norris pressed his foot against the accelerator and sped away.

Terri left a note saying she was sick, and left him to his own devices. Despite being at work and having a towering stack of papers on his desk, happiness surged through him. He worked hard in solitude, taking a few breaks but he still had a significant amount of work to do.

If only I had someone here to do it for me, he thought. Someone who would work hard like myself. Someone who deserved to rise up the corporate ladder. I would treat them with respect and show them what it's like to be a real boss.

Ha, that would be the day. You need stop kidding yourself.

Norris worked well into the night. The dull hum of the computer monitor was far from the music he would like to hear but he dealt with it. He saved his documents, and then shut his computer off.

Norris walked outside where he felt the night's cold breath. He pulled his coat tight around his body trying miserably to keep the chill out. The parking lot was empty except for his car. He went over to it and pressed his key into the lock.

The sound reached Norris' small ears before he stepped inside. Footsteps, light and quick tapped the ground. They sounded like the legs of a spider, scurrying this way-ready to pounce. He stopped, rooted to the asphalt.

A woman came out the darkness; hands on her knee, gasping for air. She looked at him through the thin slits in her auburn hair. The woman looked oddly familiar but Norris was too tired to give a name to the face.

"Do I know you?" Norris asked slightly shaken.

In between breaths she began to speak, "Yes and no... I work a couple floors above you...we see each other from time to time in the morning...can I get a ride? I promise you its not far."

"Why me?"

"You're the only one left and it's far too cold to walk home on a night like this. I could pay you?" Her eyes grew wide, pleading.

Norris wasn't sure, but he figured it couldn't hurt. "I'll give you a ride. Hop in."

She smiled, revealing her gleaming teeth. Then she scrambled inside.

The ride was fast, too fast. It was over before it even began, he reached her apartment building. She got out of the car and dug into her pockets for cash.

Norris stopped her, "There's no need for that; it's on the way to my house." Then something unexpected happened. She slid half of her body in the car, leaned over and kissed him on the cheek and said thank you. He drove off with a smile on his face and a pressure that drilled into his head.

Norris woke the next morning with a slight pain in his head. He got up and went through his usual routine. Once he was dressed and ready to go, he went outside to his car.

All throughout the ride, he was content, maybe even happy. No matter how much he thought about the amount of work he had to do or the crap he had to take, his mind kept returning to the same subject. The girl on the second floor. That also brought up another thought, he didn't know her name. How stupid can you get? He thought to himself. Who meets a person for the first time and doesn't ask or give a name?

Norris felt butterflies inside his chest. He had thoughts of turning around and going back home on the off chance he would see her. He could always call in sick. No, you have to do your job, he told himself. Just walk in like usual. If you see her, don't act like a cockroach. No one likes cockroaches.

He didn't see her, the butterflies flew away but there was still that cold empty feeling inside. It plagued him all morning. The only respite he got from work and the pain was a lousy forty five minute lunch break. The emptiness he felt inside was wide, yawning. At least he could try to fill it up with food.

Norris walked along the sidewalk, squeezed in by the smelly masses. They reeked of sex, fear, and sickness all mingled together. He saw a Chinese food place so he popped inside and watched the people scurry pass like a colony of ants.

As soon as he turned around he saw her. Norris almost dropped his chicken teriyaki and coke. Luckily, he didn't. She invited him over to the small table where she sat. He set the tray down and sat directly across.

"Hey how's it going?" he asked.

"Well, it's going. I saw you stumble inside but I didn't call you over until you got your food," she replied.

"I had to get away...there are so many people out. It gets hard to breathe sometimes. I'm glad I came in here though."

"That makes two of us."

Norris walked out of the Chinese food place with feelings of giddiness and anticipation. Rachel, he finally learned her name had invited him to come over that night. He put his hand to his head, massaging it.

All throughout lunch, he felt that familiar pressure slowly rise up in his head. He held back any signs of pain. It would only get in the way.

The rest of the day, Terri watched him even more closely. She was suspicious of Norris. He never showed his happy side at work. What exactly is going on? She thought to herself.

Norris walked outside to his car and told Terri to have a nice day. He could barely believe himself. When he stepped inside, he turned up the stereo. Nature flooded the interior as he drove smoothly. Norris pictured himself in a lush green forest. Rachel stepped out behind a gigantic redwood tree and walked over. Her clothes fell away like leaves, and revealed the beauty hidden underneath. Norris could do nothing, but watch in awe as he was caught under her web of flesh.

Norris stood in front of the mirror. He just took a shower; he felt he had to both look and smell good for Rachel. To do otherwise was suicide. Casual or formal, he wasn't sure which to wear. He never was any good at picking out clothes.

Casual seems like the right choice, he thought. Norris picked out a plain black t-shirt with some blue jeans. His hair was combed back into slick wavy lines. That would do.

The drive was quick. As Norris got out of the car he looked up. A full moon shone against the starless sky. The night was like the moon, mysterious and attractive.

Norris rang the doorbell; he felt a tinge of nervousness. The feeling scrambled aside as Rachel came to the door. She wore a low cut shirt and tight jeans.

"Hey stranger. You look nice tonight," she said.

"Thanks...."

"Gracias, come on in. Dinner's ready."

The dinner was nothing short of amazing. Fillet Mignon with a hearty baked potato. The meal was complemented with several glasses of red wine.

Norris excused himself from the table and stumbled into the bathroom. He felt sick, dizzy. The coldness of the water splashed against his face helped a little but it wasn't enough. And that pain, it came again, in waves, each one stronger than the last making him wince.

Norris stepped outside the bathroom and returned to the table. Rachel was in the kitchen putting the dishes up. With his head cradled in his hands, he just sat there, wishing the pain would go away. It didn't. The more time that passed, the worse it became.

Rachel came back from the kitchen with her hands on her hips. "You don't look so well." She said.

"Maybe I should leave... the meal was fabulous."

"You drank a lot wine. You shouldn't be driving and I certainly can't give you a ride. I had a few too many myself."

Perhaps you should stay the night. I wouldn't mind."

Norris did feel woozy and spending the night with Rachel didn't sound too bad. Only a madman would turn that down.

"You're right. I think I will stay the night. I could sleep on the couch if that fine?"

"Yes, that's fine. Let me get you some blankets. Follow me, they're in my room."

Norris followed drunkenly; running his hands against the wall. He needed to feel something stable, something that would give him some sense of sobriety.

Rachel grabbed his trembling hand, leading him down the hallway. It was dark. Why weren't the lights turned on? He thought he saw the darkness move, squirming with more than the bodies of two lovers.

On edge; he squeezed Rachel's delicate hand a little too hard. The darkness became still again, back to normal. Everything was fine. I should really watch how much I drink he said aloud.

Norris heard a small laugh. Was she laughing at him or something else? The laughter felt like a punch to the gut.

Rachel was all he had now. How could she? Drenched in all kinds of hurt, he grabbed her hand even tighter, the only anchor in the swelling darkness.

They turned a corner into her room. Norris' eyes adjusted and he spotted the dim outline of a bed. The next thing he knew he was pushed on top of it with Rachel on top of him. She ripped his clothes off, throwing them aside.

This is wrong, this is unnatural. He tried to speak out, voice his thoughts, but he was cut off by the darkness. Pleasure came in sparks after she guided him inside of her. That spark became an explosion of colors as he climaxed.

Time seemed to stop as it came to a dizzying halt and he felt the universe shudder. It was as if something opened up, a gateway of sorts. And through that opening something came, forcing its way through.

Norris sat there on the bed his head throbbing. He felt vulnerable in the darkness as his cum dried in between his legs. Rachel was gone moving about the room. He called out to her.

"Rachel! Rachel!"

But she wouldn't answer. He had to hear her voice, something. The silence was too much to bear.

The pain from his headache seemed to multiply and he heard small movements surround him. He couldn't tell where they came from or even if they were real. Then she came, standing a few feet from the bed. Rachel came closer; her eyes glittered like stars in the night. She was saying something. Her words sounded like the collision of planets, the birth of galaxies.

Come. Come out the darkness.

And they came. It felt like his head was going to explode. The skin on his forehead began to stretch and expand. Skin wasn't meant to do this, but it did.

It continued to stretch, ripping like paper. They came through the small opening in force, pushing one another aside. The opening grew larger. More ripping, more pain.

Black shapes scrambled out and slid down his face and onto his cold, rigid body. He heard giggling, laughter. Blood came out in streams, rushing streams.

Norris wished the blood would wash it all away but as reality dawned on him, dusk came and he heard something snap and splinter.

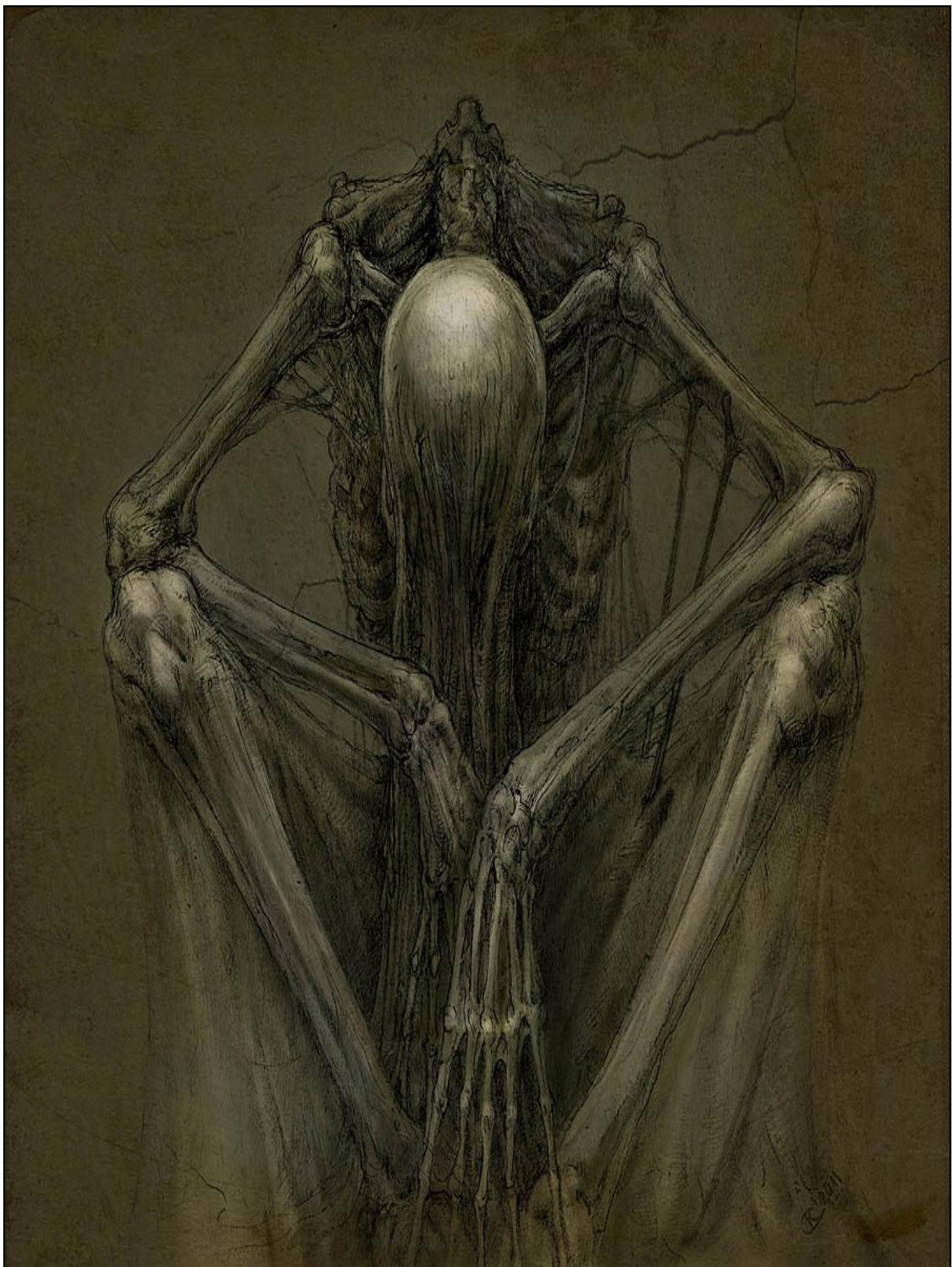
Norris began to giggle; then laugh. He laughed uncontrollably as the children pulled themselves from the wreckage that was his face.





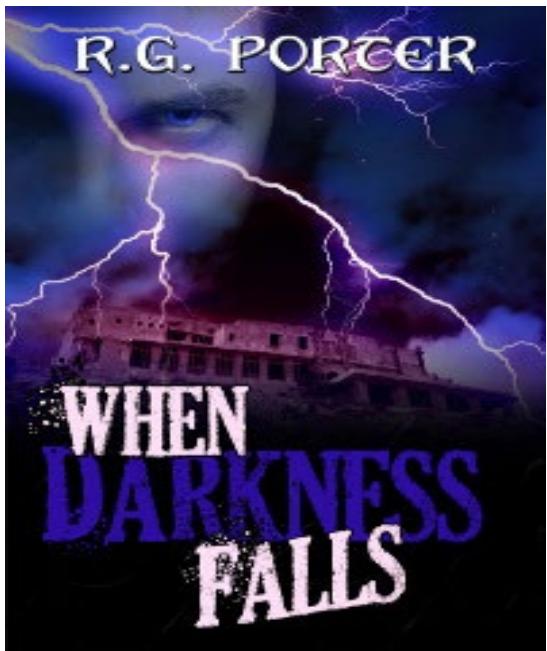






WHEN DARKNESS FALLS BY R.G. PORTER-A REVIEW BY COURTNEY ALSOP

The year before the story starts, Gwen lost her twin sister Lisa, leaving a gaping hole in her that refuses heal. Her friends, meaning well, drag her on a camping trip into the mountains to help her unwind. She does not want to go. Gwen hears Lisa's voice, warning her, telling her not to go. She should have listened. They pack into two cars, and with the help of some reckless driving, both cars are involved in an accident



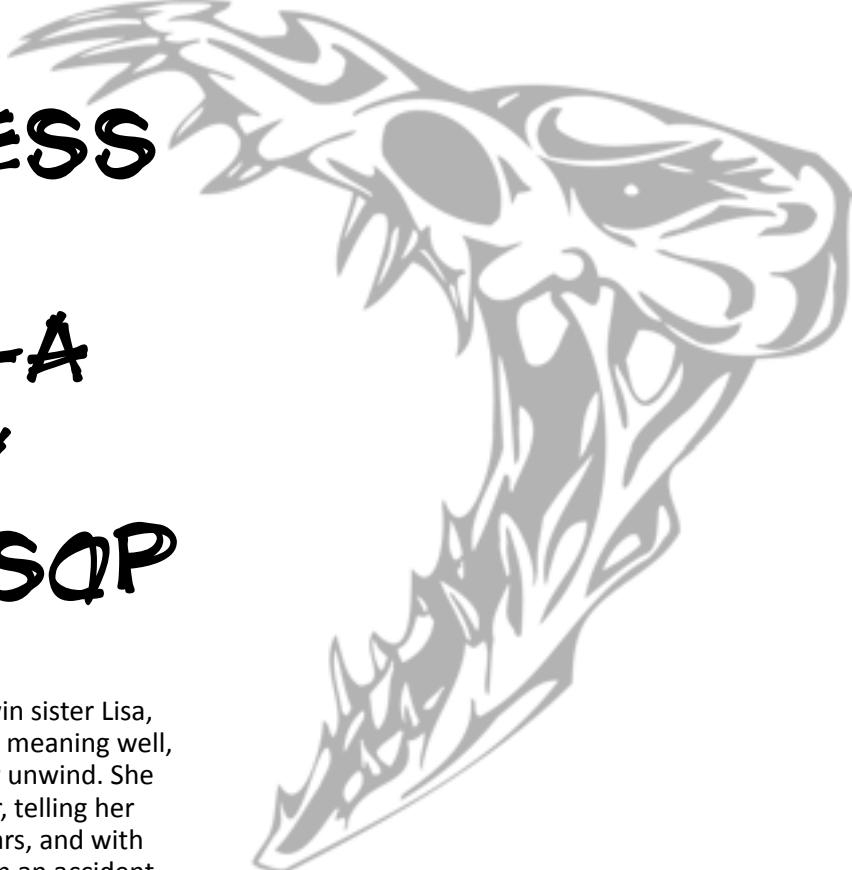
with an oncoming car. Gwen watches the accident and she knows that it is the end for her.

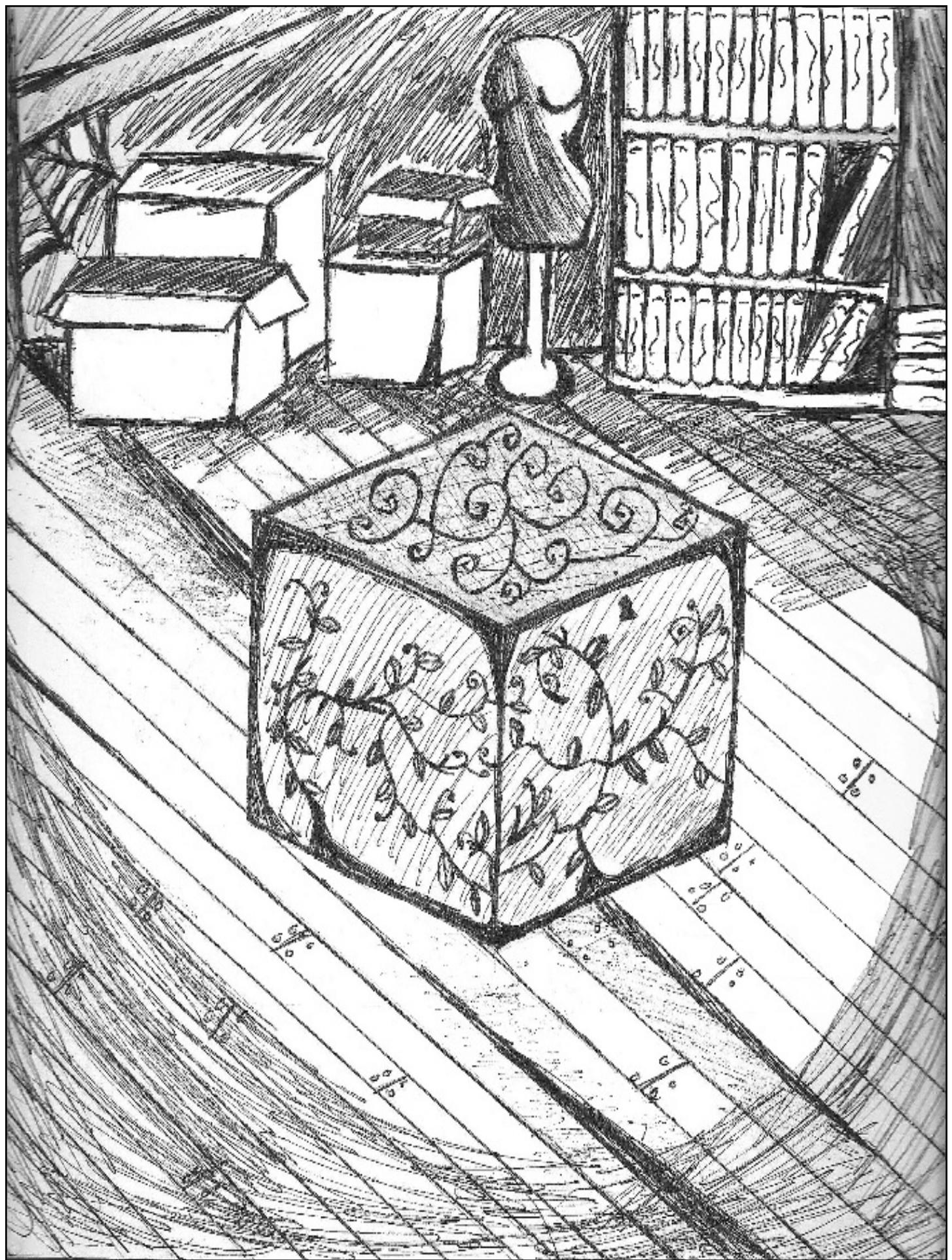
Except that she wakes up in a hotel. Her friends and the driver of the oncoming car are uninjured. The owner of the hotel, Than, informs them that he saved them all. However, because of a storm, they are all trapped until the storm clears. He will accommodate them with rooms and food for free, and he has only two very simple rules: do not force open the locked doors and do not take any objects that belong to the hotel. It soon becomes apparent that there is more to his "hotel," and if his guests disobey his rules they meet a gruesome end.

The overall story has a great premise. It explores the consequences of sin, the reality of choice, and living life for yourself without acting recklessly. The writing is a little slow, as after the first death we see the formula: the story shifts from Gwen to one of the other characters doing something stupid and we see their demise. It works much like a horror movie. One by one the audience sees another

character or two die. They are all tested in varying ways. They die in fitting ways. It is much like the horror movies where you know that basically everyone but the main character and their love interest is going to perish. The question is, who will survive alongside Gwen and what exactly is Than's hotel?

The writing is not going to win any awards for being outstanding, as some of it is just bland and it breaks the "show, don't tell" rule all the time. When she gets around to describing the cast of characters that Gwen is accompanying on the road trip it is an information overload. There is also the issue of the repetitiveness of Porter's writing that drives me nuts. How many times do we have to hear that Gwen does not trust Than or Roland or that she thinks that the whole situation is strange? As long as you are not looking for a literary masterpiece, *When Darkness Falls* offers a gruesome experience.





Toybox by Vylot Hart

I

Ever since Lira was a little girl, for as long as she could remember there had been a box in her attic. It was a large wooden crate, perfectly square and dark blue in colour. Painted designs interrupted the smooth dark blue that lazily spread across the wooden surface. Golden swirls curled across the top, and silver vines trailed along the sides. It was rather like a jack in the box, except that it was taller than her, and there were no seams. No gaps that might indicate the presence of a lid. Even painted. She should've been able to find those lines. It was almost as if the box had always been one single part, with no opening.

But that was silly. Her father called it a box, and all boxes opened. So there must be a way inside.

Lira had always wondered what was inside the box. Spending many hours sitting beside the box, tracing the shape of the swirls and the vines with one finger. Sometimes her mother would find her fast asleep beside the box. Sighing, her lips would quirk into a smile and she'd carry the little girl downstairs, to tuck her into bed.

Every day for years, Lira gravitated towards the box. No matter what she did, no matter how she intended to spend her day, she always ended wandering upstairs, absently tracing the designs on its side. Wondering what lay inside. Lira had no siblings and few friends, and so she had plenty of time to spend in the attic, sprawled beside the blue curiosity, endlessly drawing and redrawing it in velvet-covered notebooks.

Somehow, during those days, it never occurred to her to question her parents about it. To ask if they knew what lay inside. To ask why it was there, and where it had come from. Lira was well aware that its contents were probably something simple, something mundane. But unsatisfied curiosity is a powerful force, especially in the very young, before age and responsibility quell and crush imagination. Her mother had always said that children were important, special. That they could see things that adults couldn't, that they could think up things that no adult was capable of. If that was the case, thought a ten year old Lira, then perhaps only she would be able to see what was within the box. The Toybox, as she'd started to call it.

II

One day, when Lira's twelfth birthday had come and gone, the girl took refuge upstairs, not wanting to partake in the belated celebrations her mother had cobbled together. Walking up the narrow wooden staircase, up to the very top floor of the old Victorian, her legs moving slowly but fluid from muscle memory. It didn't take long to crest the stairs, well-worn and smooth from years of use.

Lira hummed to herself, mouthing the words of a half-forgotten nursery rhyme, fingers brushing the raised velvet patterns of fleur de lis upon the walls of the stairwell. The attic, itself, was dark and dusty and cobwebs hung from its distant corners like secrets, mysterious and unreachable because of the high ceiling. It was like her own personal little kingdom. As usual, she sat down beside the box, and as per usual she took a blue velvet-covered notebook out of her pinafore pocket, a pencil tucked beside one delicate ear.

However, today was anything but usual.

There was something different about the box, today. Now that was strange. The Toybox had been unchanged for as long as Lira could remember, and perhaps even longer than that. But today, where the front of the box had been smooth and featureless, save for the vine patterns, there was a lock.

The lock, itself, was unremarkable. The colour of tarnished silver and plain in design, it didn't seem to match with the filigree that embellished the rest of the box. Almost as if it didn't really belong there. The keyhole was large, and Lira fell to her knees before the box, examining the lock in the dim light.

The lock certainly hadn't been there the day before, she knew that. How very curious, she thought. This warranted further investigation.

Lira ran back downstairs, all her memories of all the books she'd read upon opening locks flooding to the forefront of her mind. She'd somehow known this was going to happen, and unquestioning the strangeness of it, as many children do, she'd done some research. She knew all about tension wrenches and pin and tumblers and so on.

If her reckoning was right, all she needed was something that she could jam into the lock, something that could break it. So, running outside, into the toolshed and thoroughly mindless of the pelting rain, she quickly located what she needed. A screwdriver.

Soon enough, she was back upstairs, and with a quick thrust, she forced the head of the screwdriver into the lock, hitting the handle with the heel of her palm. There was a *crack* as the lock broke.

Seams that had once been invisible now appeared, looking rather more like drawings than anything else. Rushing along the edges of the box, as though racing one another, like sketches made by an invisible hand.

With bated breath, Lira stood on her tiptoes, barely able to see the top of the box- She'd always had to stand atop a stack of old encyclopaedias to do so before. I've grown, she smiled, unable to repress a small laugh.

Finally, after wondering for so long, after so many hours spent alone, isolated and dreaming, she lifted the lid. It was thinner than the sides, and far less heavy than she'd thought it would be. Lira threw the lid open. And saw...

Nothing.

Disappointment and anger quickly started to well up inside her, along with the rather childish desire to burst into tears. Balling her tiny hands up into fists, Lira counted to ten, forcing her frustration away. Panic and rage never helped anyone, and it only clouded the mind. Stopped one from thinking logically. Her father had taught her that.

An answer quickly came to her: of course she wouldn't be able to properly see into the box if she was standing on her tiptoes. She sighed, encyclopaedias it was, then.

Once she'd gathered enough encyclopaedias from the far and dusty corners of the attic, stacking them high, she drew level with the top of the box. She peered inside. All that she could see was darkness. Inky and impenetrable.

Leaning forward, she dipped her hand into the blackness. Lira shivered; it was cold.

White fingers, long and delicate shot out of the darkness and curled around her arm. Lira's eyes went wide with fear. She shrieked, her scream wavering as she paused to draw breath. She struggled, trying to wrench her arm out of the phantom hand's grasp. Bracing herself against the box, Lira was quickly reduced to desperately attempting to not pitch forwards.

More hands, similar-hued, shot out of the box. They grabbed at her other arm, they snatched at her face. Long nails raked across her cheek, and fingers tangled in her silver-blonde hair. Hands attached to impossibly long arms.

Her scream rose in volume, apparently unheard by her parents. No one came to help, no one came to save her. Lira's struggle proved fruitless as the hands finally yanked her into the box, brooking no argument.

III

Lira opened her eyes, and found that she was lying on the hard wood floor of the attic. Had it all been a nightmare? She hauled herself into a sitting position, hugging her knees against herself. Lira automatically looked up at the box. The lock was still there, but the screwdriver was gone.

She scrubbed a hand through her hair, not minding that her mother would probably tell her off later for doing so. It was an old, bad habit of Lira's, and it always left knots in her hair. Tired and hungry, and feeling guilty about avoiding her mother earlier, she stumbled downstairs.

That was odd. The smell of cooking apples and roast beef, a scent that permeated every room of the house, was gone. As though it had never been there, as though the meal her mother had cooked had simply ceased to exist. It took Lira a moment longer to realise how thoroughly cold it was in the house.

Abnormally so, even for a rainy day like this.

She went to the kitchen, wanting to ask her mother or father about this; wondering if the boiler had broken yet again. This was an old house, after all.

Except the kitchen was empty. The stove, an old iron construction, was cold and looked like it hadn't been used for days. Years, even. The house quickly got darker as night approached, the shadows gathering together like old friends visiting each other.

Cobwebs hung in corners that were normally scrupulously clean, grime that normally accumulated after years of neglect had spontaneously sprung up within the last few hours. Lira searched the house from top to bottom, but found no sign that her parents had ever lived there. That they'd ever existed.

Every surface was thick with dust, every surface seethed with the thick growth of varicoloured mould. Every room had decayed into utter disrepair. Every room but hers. Her room was pristine as usual, with books of fairy tales wedged into an overflowing bookcase at the end of her white metal crib-bed. Her bed was even the same as she'd left it -half-made,

with her pillow pushed up against the wall.

Lira ran back downstairs, pelting down the creaking wooden steps, deciding to search outside. Rain still plummeted from a furious grey sky, like icy spears thrown to earth by irate gods. The usually well-kept, almost boringly well-trimmed garden was an overgrown mess of tall grass, dead trees and thorny brambles. Utterly impassable. The toolshed had collapsed under the weight of fallen branches.

Desperate, hungry and afraid, Lira ran back into the house.

She ended up back in the kitchen, trailing through the dining room to the larder. Perhaps there were some cans in there. As far as she knew, canned food lasted forever. Shivering and soaked to the bone, and disheartened by her fruitless search, she made her way into the small brick room. The light didn't work, but she managed to find a can of spaghetti. Opening it took her longer than she cared to think about, and by the time she did, Lira quickly decided that it hadn't been worth it. The contents of the can had gone a very interesting shade of green. Acting on an angry impulse, she turned and threw the can against the iron stove. Black-green spaghetti spattered against the white-washed wall like a bug on a wind shield.

"Now, that wasn't very nice, was it?" said a smooth voice; calm and utterly unfamiliar.

Lira froze, abruptly scared out of her wits. It seemed that she was no longer alone in this little waking nightmare. She slowly turned around, her arm limply dropping to her side.

Behind her and sitting on the edge of the dinner table was a tall man. A black stovepipe hat was perched awkwardly upon his crown, wavy white hair peeking underneath the brim, very nearly reaching his shoulders. Upon his pointed face, and concealing the true colour of his eyes was a pair of perfectly round glasses, tinted black. His legs were crossed, and he pulled a thick coat of dark wool around his thin body.

No, that was wrong. It was more like he was clothed by darkness, rather than simply wearing dark clothes. He peered at her, cocking his head at her astonished expression. "You opened the box, didn't you?"

Lira slowly forced her gaping mouth closed, slowly dipping her head in affirmation. Once, then twice.

He snorted, but there was no humour behind the noise. "Silly girl, now you're trapped here." The look on her face must've been one of puzzlement because he went on to say, "That box has always been a part of this house. No one knows where it came from, or how it originated. But those stupid enough to open it—" he smiled with false sweetness, "-get pulled in. They end up here. Before long, the shadows come for them."

Lira's eyes went wide with horror, and she shivered, staring at his nonchalant face. Something that was, in itself, quite alarming. Corpse-pale and waxen hued, it barely appeared human. Then again, Lira reminded herself, considering the sort of situation she'd gotten herself into, he might not be human at all.

"W-what do you mean by the shadows coming for them?" she forced those words past her lips, despite being scared of what the answer would be. She had to know, though.

"Those who got pulled in earlier on...live off those who fall in." The man pulled a silver pocket watch out from within the depths of his coat. "You have until nightfall. So... Half an hour? Give or take." He grinned at her, showing off sharp teeth, like those of a predatory fish, transparent and stained from blood. "Run."

Lira made for the stairs, the darkness gathering faster and faster as the day rapidly reached its conclusion. Hands crafted from death and smoke and shadow reached for her, scabbled at her ankles. Teasing her, frightening her for fun. As though it were all a game. To the shadows, perhaps it was.

She burst through the attic door, racing towards the box; scrambling up the encyclopaedias that she'd left stacked there. She clambered to the lip of the box, climbing inside the infernal thing. Desperately hoping that she was right, that this was a doorway and that this was the way home.

Lira's midriff was pressed against the edge of the box when a pair of hands grabbed her ankles, pulling hard. "No! Let go! Let go!" she sobbed, kicking hard. The hands lessened their grip, she scabbled at the interior of the box, pulling herself down past the darkness that curled within.

The shadows, emboldened by her fear, echoed her pleas, many voices speaking as one. Rising in volume into a roar, an incomprehensible tangle of sound. On reflex, Lira covered her ears, scrunching her eyes shut. Her eyes flew wide and a soft gasp escaped her lips when she realised her mistake.

She was yanked backwards, and the lid slammed shut.

IV

Lira smiled at her parents at dinner, that night. Talking more animatedly than she had for years, laughing and teasing and joking. Just like normal girls do. Just like she'd never done before she'd fallen through the box. Later that week, a new girl arrived at her school and they became fast friends. Before, Lira had never been very close to anyone, not really liking those who called themselves her friends.

Her parents were glad to see that she was happy, that she'd finally left that box in the attic alone. Not really questioning the sudden change in her behaviour. They attributed it to hormones, to her growing up.

Before the year was out, they left that house, moving to the city. Leaving the box in the attic. That dangerous portal to a parallel world, where the real Lira was still, fearful and alone, running from the shadows. Forgotten. Perhaps the shadows caught her, perhaps she is still alive, still running. The only way to find out is to open the box...



ANYTHING IS EASY FOR A HANGMAN

COURTNEY DUFF

I called John last night and he came to my house. The stairs creaked and I could see him clutching the stair rail as he hiked up to my room. He stood at the foot of my bed and looked at me mournfully. “Mark, I thought we were done with this.”

“You asked me to do this,” I whined. “It’s your fault.”

“You can’t call me here every night before. My wife is starting to get anxious.”

“I’m so sorry I’m not convenient. You should consider that next time you pick someone.”

John sat on the edge of my bed. The edge of his outline was fluid in the moonlight. “I picked you,” he said, “because you have a sense of morality.”

“Shouldn’t that have excluded me from the start?”

“It’s what makes you the right man for the job. You’re doing the world a service, Mark.”

“Shouldn’t I be more concerned with getting them help?”

“These men can’t be helped,” he warned. “Don’t even try. It’s time for you to grow a sack, Mark, and do your fucking job. You agreed. Don’t back out now.”

He heaved himself off the bed. His immense weight shifted the foam mattress and I used the swell of the wave to roll to my side away from him. “I’ll be there at ten tomorrow evening,” I said.

I didn’t sleep. I spent the night watching the moon beams for John. I worried he might come back and find me clutching a pillow to my chest where Lily should have been.

Driving to work this evening, I aimlessly took the freeway instead of the surface streets. I felt more secluded from the public, from the unaware masses. If they knew what I did for a living, they’d chase after me with pitchforks. As it is, even with my anonymity, I kept an eye on the rear view mirror in the hopes that someone might be coming for me.

When I pulled up to the jail, the doors swung open for me and I prayed they would come flying shut on my body as I stepped inside. No luck. Instead, the guard waved to me. “Mark!” he crowed. “Let’s get this show started!”

I swallowed past the bile in my throat and imagined strapping him to the chair we store in the back room and shoving the lever with all my might so it snaps off and releases the voltage indefinitely.

I step into the chamber and see the prisoner standing outside the door. His weight is shifted from foot to foot as he dances nervously, awaiting his turn on my gurney. He’ll be my twenty-fifth kill. I feel the acid rear its head in my throat again and I gulp water from the tap.

"Mark, I'm glad you're here," John says. I snap my head up from the sink and look over my shoulder. He waits for me at the gurney, checking the levels on the bags of poison strapped to an IV-stand. Dozens of lines trail from the bags. I can't imagine what each line does -- they snake around the room and crowd the surface of the floor, making me trip as I reach for the one with the needle on the end.

"You're the only man for this job," he says in a low voice. He steps close to me and pushes his lids down to leer at my nose, his body language ominous and threatening. "This douche killed his wife and three kids. Mr. James Gibbons. Started a fire in his house just to watch 'em burn. It's time for this sucker to go burn in Hell, Mark, and you're the only man who can get him there."

I can smell the gasoline in my nose as Gibbons walks into the room. He killed four beautiful women, three he created, and I lay him down on the gurney roughly. I stand behind his head and look down on him. "Open or closed?"

"Closed, plea--" he says. His voice snaps in half when he looks up and he never finishes the second word. I reach forward and yank the curtain shut without making eye contact with the grandparents and cops behind the glass. He leans his head back and tears trail from the corners of his eyes to his ears.

"Would you like to pray?" I asked.

He screws his face up and says, "I'm not sure God wants to listen to me anymore."

I look down at him. His thick face is steadily getting more red and doughy as he cries, like the saline is melting his face. "I'll listen if you have any final words," I say.

"I didn't mean to kill my babies," he says. "I fell asleep drunk with a cigarette."

I look to John and he nods. I stand in my place and start to raise my arm to the button that will release the poison into Gibbon's arm. I look from John to Gibbons, lying on the gurney with the needle nestled in the crook of his elbow, and step away from him. John comes towards me. The sound of his footsteps is an angry, staccato beat that pulses in my head.

"I can't do it," I say through gritted teeth.

"Fucking hell, Mark, we talked about this."

"I'm done, John."

"You're fired. Go get your shit." John turns to Gibbons, who has sat up on the gurney, and shoves him down. He turns his back to me and starts readying the poison and hefts the block with the button carved into the center that releases the poison.

"Let me do it," I say. I push John from the gurney and stand behind Gibbons once more. I look at him and see a tear drop onto his face from high above him. From me. I lean down and whisper, "Find your girls in heaven and apologize to them for me for killing their daddy." I press the button.

The curtain rustles. I look up for the first time from Gibbon's dead body and see John flinging the curtain open. I lock eyes with the girls' grandmother. Her eyes are thick with tears and her hand is covering her lips. Her chest heaves when she breathes. I see her lying in a coffin, eyes sewn shut, as she struggles to stand. She faints on the lap of the cop next to her and I flee the room.

I shove photo frames and stacks of paper into the box I brought from home this morning. I stand facing away from the general public, hoping a mass murderer will escape from his cell and drive a shiv through my back. No luck.

John leans on my desk as I pack. "You're a wimp," he says. "So the dude was an alcoholic. Doesn't mean he didn't kill his babies."

"Fuck you, John," I say wearily. My statement loses most of its impact in the tired way I say it. He stands straighter.

"Oh, is baby mad?" he asks in a high-pitched voice. "Does widdle Mark want to go take a nap so he isn't so grumpy?"

I shove past him, using my box as a battering ram against his chest. He hits the bars of a cell nearby.

Tattooed arms reach out from inside and wrap around his chest in a bear hug. His eyes open wide and he stares at me. The inmate looks at me and dares me to do anything. I walk up and stand directly in front of John. I can see the fear in his eyes. The inmate behind him, a man in jail for stealing cars, eyes me hesitantly. The silver glitter of a razor blade embedded in a toothbrush winks at me from his hand.

I wrest the shiv from his hand and he starts to release John. Before he can drop him, I bury the blade in John's neck and twist. Flesh curls and breaks apart under the metal, blood spurting in time with his heartbeat into my face. His eyes roll into the back of his head as the inmate throws him to the ground and crawls onto his bed. He stares at me. They both stare at me.

The knife clatters to the floor in dead silence and I walk to the center of the room. The inmates crowd at their doors as I stagger through the aisle. I see corpses where the prisoners should be. I throw up and they're startled out of their paralyzing shock. They cheer and whoop, beat their fists against the bars, whistle and holler.

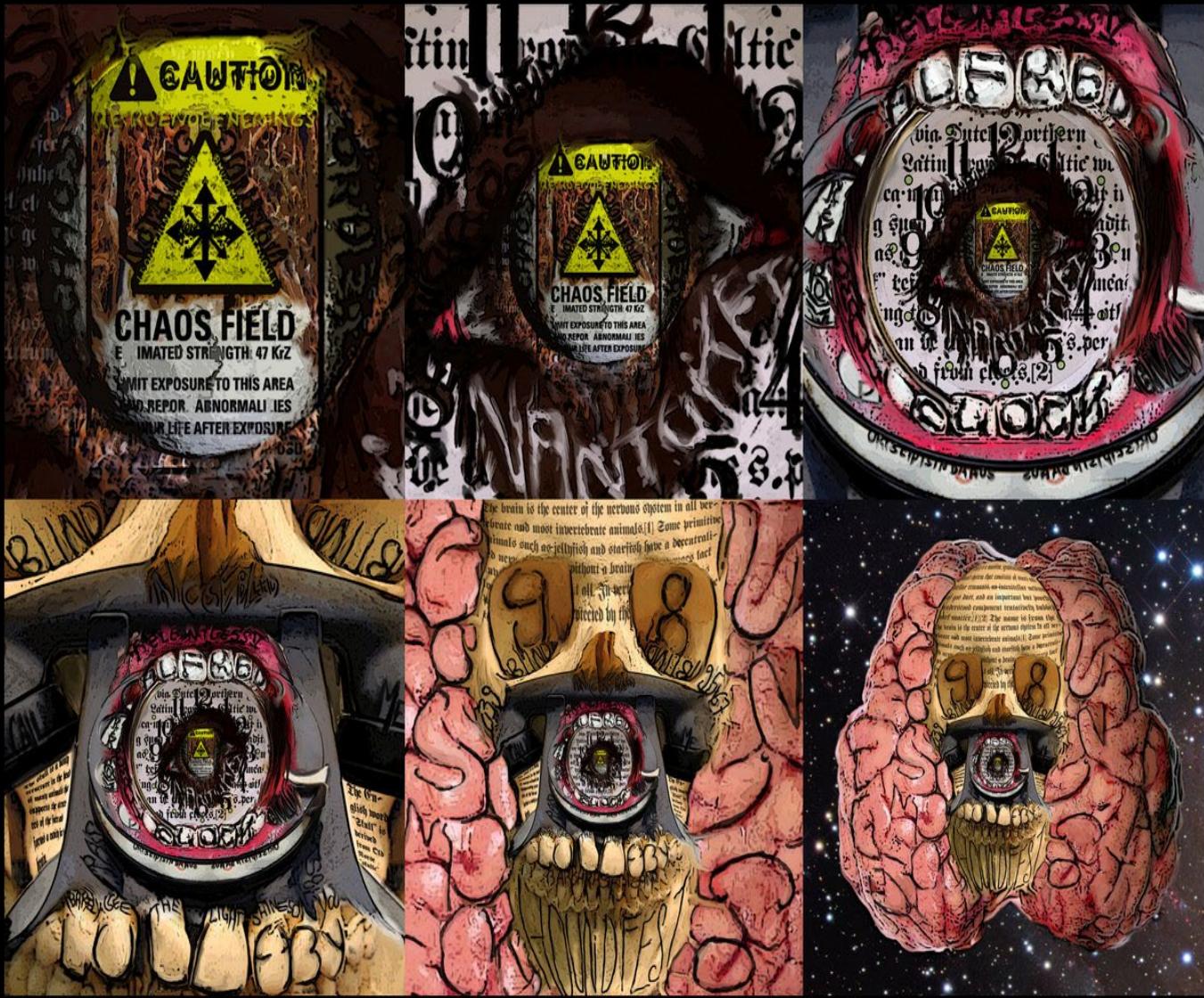
I drop to my knees. I'm scheduled to kill most of these men before I die.

I grab the shiv from where it fell and drive it into my thigh. The blood swells around it and rides the curve of my leg as I stab over and over. The inmates fall silent.

I won't kill more than twenty-six people.

I yank the knife from my leg and stick it deep into my neck.

Make that twenty-seven.





<http://silviet-stock.deviantart.com/>

SILENT HILL: DOWNPOUR: A REVIEW BY COURTNEY ALSO

Silent Hill games are, essentially, a main character trapped in Silent Hill, or they are otherwise being affected



negatively by the town. What makes a *Silent Hill* game more compelling than other run-of-the mill horror stories are the reasons why the main characters are entangled with the ancient forces of Silent Hill. The darker side of human nature, the side that we hide under a shiny veneer, come out in surprising ways.

You do not want to spend too much time in the mostly abandoned town that is periodically taken over by a monster infested Otherworld. In *Silent Hill: Downpour*, Murphy Pendleton has found himself there, and he is looking to escape. But there is a catch. The protagonist is a prisoner in a penitentiary, serving a sentence for a crime he committed. The game starts with Murphy in a prison shower, beating sequestered inmate Pat Napier to death. When Napier is on the ground with Murphy looming over him, he asks, "Why?" and Murphy responds with, "You know exactly why." The beginning of the game is thick with unanswered questions and words left unsaid.

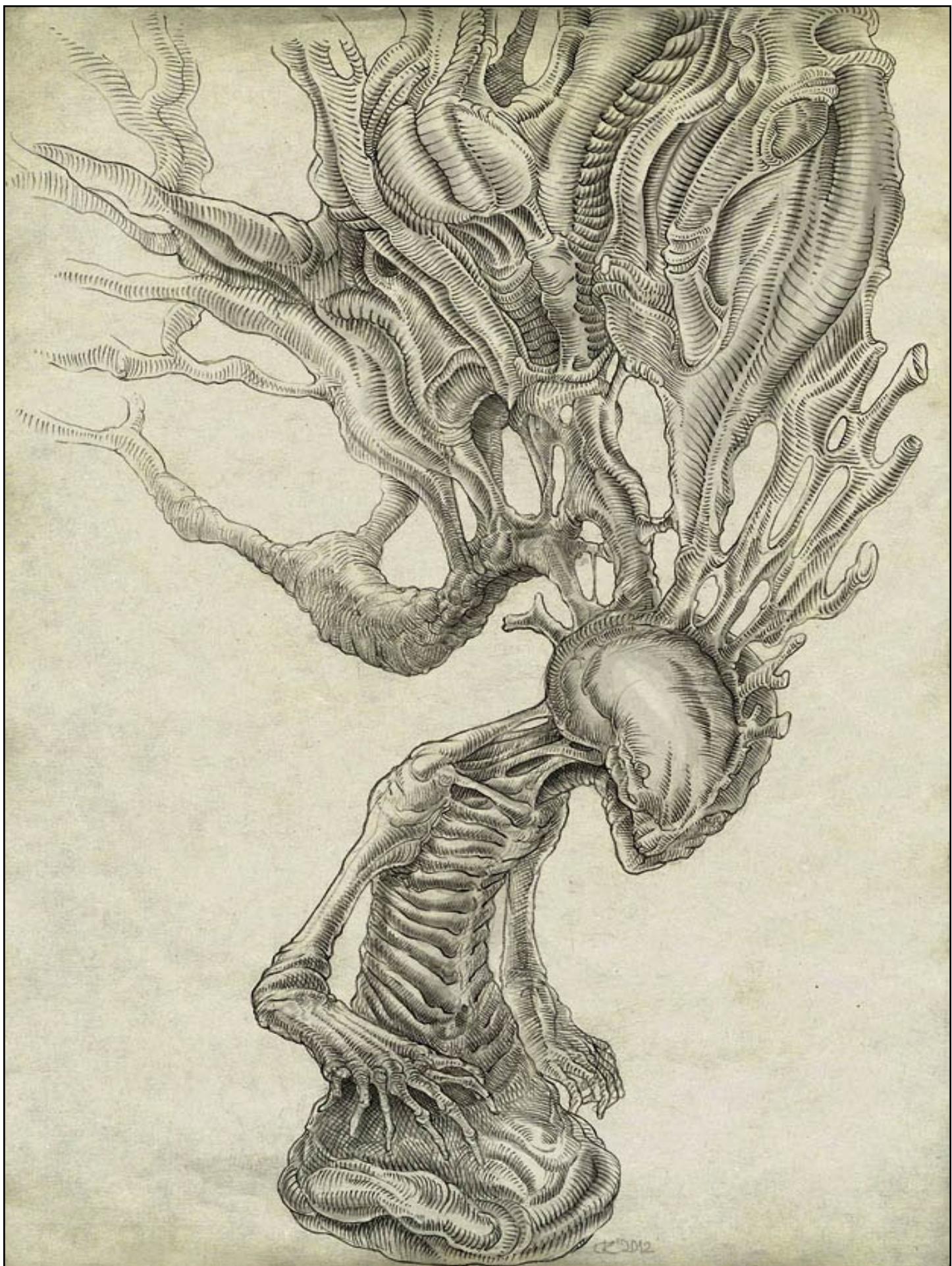
The question becomes *How do I become attached to the main character? Should I?* He is a

prisoner, and your tutorial is beating Napier to a bloody mush. Murphy does not proclaim his innocence in anything. Maybe he deserves to be in Silent Hill? On the other hand, very little is known about Murphy. Why was he in prison? Why did he murder Napier?

Everything about the main character or the supporting cast is not thrown into the player's face. It is exactly what we need more of- a little mystery and a huge dose of complexity that the series has recently been missing. We should not quietly accept every detail of a protagonist revealed in the first chapter of a novel. When we gradually learn about the character as we read we are engaged. It is similar to meeting someone in real life; nutcases aside, who spills every detail of their life in the first ten minutes of you meeting them? Getting to the bottom of Murphy's character was the most rewarding character development I have experienced in a long while.

Tired of the same old Silent Hill? This *Silent Hill* title deviates in several ways from its predecessors. *Downpour* has a real-time weather system involving rain, which increases the spawning rate of enemies and their aggression. The town is opened up for free exploration and there are optional side quests that the player can complete for rewards (achievements or trophies), or you can just keep walking and ignore them.

There is a lag issue that quickly becomes mind-numbing, partly due to the large world that is loaded. Occasionally there is a save issue, as more than once I have loaded my game and I had lost around thirty minutes of progress. Vatra Games is still working on a patch, and with the recent abandonment of the *Silent Hill: HD Collection* patch for the Xbox 360, I commend the team for still pressing forward with the patch. With the patch in the near future, the game will be that much more enjoyable than it already is. It is a survivor horror game with aspects of a psychological thriller with an effective combat system. It is so varied in game play that it is sure to please a wide audience and hold us *Silent Hill* fans off until the second movie release.



. 7 Questions with a Published Writer—

John Shirley

Interview by Daniel William Gonzales



1. Thank you for agreeing to this interview. You have a great reputation as a writer of both extreme horror and cyberpunk. What is your greater preference or do you get a similar thrill from writing both?

Thrill? I don't know if there's much thrill to it. I choose a genre partly due to the market place and partly because it's easier to make a statement, to get across the metaphor I want to convey, with that particular genre. I try to write meaningfully as well as entertainingly. Sometimes my meaning calls for cyberpunk, sometimes for a supernatural or urban fantasy tale (Like my novel Bleak History); sometimes it's just more artistically satisfying. Writing songs gives me a thrill—I do that too. Writing fiction gives me satisfaction.

2. Not a lot of people really understand the definition of cyberpunk. What do you see as genuine cyberpunk? In terms of films and books that are

genuinely dystopic or represent the urban decay?

For me, cyberpunk is about the street's uses for high technology; how the underside of society can use technology to liberate itself. It's about the dark side of technology as well; it's also about the urban reality of the near future. I don't predict apocalypse, but I see us going through a dark period, due to climate change, other environmental crises, authoritarian-conservative regimes, Superpacs, the manipulation of people by right wing media. So people have to survive, in all that, as individuals. How do they do it? That's my cyberpunk anyhow. As for urban decay, it's always going to be with us, and there'll always be urban growth; some of us ride the cycles of decay, like surfing a wave of entropy...

3. Splatterpunk is also a term that people throw around a lot. Is it just about gore or is it more about the visceral thrill that fans of horror get when they sink their teeth into a really good horror book or film?

I didn't create the term splatterpunk and I don't identify with it. Apparently there's a consensus that some of my earlier urban horror, like my novel Cellars, is splatterpunk and was influential. I don't know what it is to other people—to me extreme horror, as in my story collection In Extremis, is about pushing readers past their normal boundaries, penetrating more deeply into them...

"CYBERPUNK'S PATIENT ZERO." —WILLIAM GIBSON

john shirley

a song called youth

the pioneering cyberpunk trilogy

4. You have won the Bram Stoker Award and the International Horror Guild Award, what do you consider the best horror novels and films of the last two decades?

I rarely read horror anymore. I think the last horror books I read were Clive Barker's *The Books of Blood*, years ago, which I very much admired. If I read horror it's re-reading Machen or Lovecraft or their peers, or Edgar Allan Poe. Old masters. Ray Bradbury's horror was great; he and Richard Matheson and Charles Beaumont had a big effect on my writing. On the modern side I did read some Cody Goodfellow, thought he was great; have dipped into some of the "bizarre" writers, like David Agranoff, and I think they have something to say and they are pushing out boundaries with verve and that's good.

I do watch some new horror films. I liked *The Cabin in the Woods* as an entertainment; I liked *The Woman in Black* for its serious style; I did enjoy *Chronicle* which is borderline horror, and also admired *28 Days Later* and the *Paranormal Activity* movies. I admired,

going back a ways, the first *Blair Witch* film. I think the best horror films I've seen in recent years, however, were foreign—*THE HOST*, from Korea, is the best giant monster film I ever saw (I did like *Cloverfield* though), and *LET THE RIGHT ONE IN*, from Scandinavia, is a great film...I dislike horror films that are in some way innately sadistic, are salacious about cruelty: so-called Horror Porn. This despite some of the extremes seen in my book *In Extremis*. My stories always have a moral center without being preachy.

5. Your most recent novel, "A Song Called Youth" is about a future dystopia where a nuclear strike has decimated parts of Europe and people banding together guerilla style. We seem to be living in an apocalyptic culture that always seems to be predicting the end, why do you think people are so fascinated by humanity's destruction?

The cover copy is not accurate, on that book, with respect to the nuclear strike part. Only small tactical nukes were used. It's really about how the social chaos of a third world war (which is NOT a nuclear holocaust) leaves people vulnerable to a new fascism. Civilization goes on, in the novel—it's not like *Road Warrior*. Humanity is not destroyed in *A Song Called Youth*, or in danger of it...what is going on is that humanity is endanger of enslavement. I warn how the cycle of fascism, right-wing extremism, could easily come back and how people would fight against it. But it's true that people express their general anxiety about this centerless, socially fragmentary world by fantasizing about a zombie apocalypse, or alien invasion, or some other world shattering scenario. It's people projecting their anxiety and feeling of powerlessness on civilization. There may be some unconscious hostility coming out there, too, in people fascinated with the apocalyptic.

6. If you were to give a young horror or sci-fi/cyberpunk writer advice on trying to make it in the

industry, how should they go about marketing themselves? What helps a writer stand out from the crowd?

It's a hard time to do it because the industry is changing, the sands are shifting beneath our feet, and editors are in a kind of panic, running this way and that. I suppose that also makes it a time of opportunity. Most of the solid work available to writers at the moment is tie-in work, 'world' stuff, eg writing a novel (by invitation only, mind you, from the licensors) on a popular tv show or movie or comic character. Some may break in that way if they make the right contacts. Then they could possibly branch out to more original conceptions. Self publishing is more respectable than it used to be—though I haven't done it myself—and possibly one could get noticed that way. People should not be obnoxious in facebook etc, trying to drag other people into 'liking' their fan pages when those people never even heard of them, all that kind of thing. It doesn't work. Just keep writing, be persistent, note what sort of fiction is preferred by which editors at whatever publisher, perhaps meet some at a convention and pitch them an idea, in thirty words or less. "I want to do a series of novel about a woman who gets the power to..." If they think it's a hot idea they might look at sample chapters from you. I would advise would-be writers to read a great deal outside genre, not to rely on movies and television and games to "educate" them about storytelling; to become literate. Editors will notice if you aren't well read or you're ungrammatical, etc.

7. Can spirituality play a role in horror or sci-fi and should it? Or do you think for horror to work, it has to exist in a world of moral decay and injustice?

There's no contradiction between spirituality and a world of moral decay. There has always been moral decay and injustice. Spirituality may indeed be a response to it; a reaction against it. Most of my works contain metaphysical ideas, sometimes outright spiritual ideas. My novel THE OTHER END is a dramatization of an alternative "judgment day" for people like me who were annoyed by the right-wing fundamentalist Christian "left behind" brand of judgment day. If we have to have a judgment day, why not one imagined by progressive people? And it has a Gnostic spiritual underpinning, that book. My novel DEMONS is a horror novel and woven into it are definite spiritual ideas having to do with awakening, self observation, consciousness. It's found in my science fiction too. . .Actually one could place horror stories in utopian settings—it's more horrific if even a really healthy world can be infected by evil....

John Shirley is the author of numerous novels, story collections, screenplays ("THE CROW"), teleplays and articles. A futurologist and social critic, John was a featured speaker at TED-x in Brussels in 2011. His novels include Everything is Broken, The A SONG CALLED YOUTH cyberpunk trilogy (omnibus released in 2012), Bleak History, Wetbones, Demons, City Come A-Walkin' and The Other End. His short story collection Black Butterflies won the Bram Stoker Award, and was chosen by Publisher's Weekly as one of the best books of the year. His new story collection is In Extremis: The Most Extreme Short Stories of John Shirley. His stories have been included in three Year's Best anthologies. He is also a songwriter (eg, for Blue Oyster Cult), and a singer. Black October records will soon be releasing a compilation of selected songs, BROKEN MIRROR GLASS: Recordings by John Shirley, 1978-2011. The authorized website is at john-shirley.com.



The Woman In The Plexiglas

B.T. Joy

After three days his blood still dripped into the eye-holes.

When he'd fired the .44 his skull had fractured outwards; turning his hairline into a mangled ooze, the consistency of wet sushi, and causing his frontal lobe to sag out of the open wound like empty intestines. His head had hit the plexiglas and Julie could do nothing but watch, from inside, as a black puddle formed slowly in the suprasternal notch and solar plexus of the suit.

It was surreal, hard to understand, like seeing things from inside the body; blood gathering and drying on the cold, plastic flesh.

Another red trickle beaded through the rigid holes, where her eyes stared out at the damp-mottled ceiling of the concrete basement; she closed them and felt the now chilled wetness seep onto her lids. She opened her eyes again, the stuff rolling away to the side of her face like cheap red makeup.

There was no way out. The clear exoskeleton that surrounded her, enclosing her legs, arms, torso and head, was an inch-and-a-half of industrial plexiglas, padlocked five times on one side of the operating table, with hinges the size of beer-cans on the other. Her hands, feet and neck had been bound to the table with leather straps before the game had begun and the only parts of the entire device that were pregnable in any way were the four thin ventilation slits near her nose and the large triangular section cut out at the thing's crotch.

There's a certain feeling to being trapped this way. It's like the flesh under the skin is set on fire; it twists and grows, pushing at the dermal extremity. Seizing. Bursting. Screaming. Writhing. She wasn't just a woman trapped behind plastic, she was a woman trapped behind skin, trapped behind plastic. It was that feeling that

got her off, unable to move a muscle, constricted, bound; completely at the mercy of the guy with the five keys to the five padlocks. It had gotten to the point she couldn't feel anything at all until she was shut up inside that thing; until the deepest parts of her flesh panicked to be free.

But the game was one thing.

For an hour after Hughie committed suicide she'd thought she would pass out with the sheer terror; the physiological fear that hammered blow for blow with the wasted adrenaline through her trussed-up veins. She'd spent the first twenty minutes screaming for help. Until she could feel the raw insides of her lungs. Until her throat clamped up and wouldn't make another whimper. Strange how desperate you get. With her voice gone she tried thrusting her hips up against the plastic where the crotch-hole marked the only exposed section of her body. She heaved against it like she had so many nights against Hughie's rough hands; trying, with all the energy in her quaking thighs, to break the bottom half of that grim, transparent body-bag.

When she'd been young, Julie had visualised death as a massive wall at the far end of life. No matter how hard you pushed at that wall it would never move; not an inch, not a single second. Her naked ass touched the slick table. Her legs were exhausted with the pushing.

Her heart seared with a cocktail of frenzied chemicals. Her flesh shuddered. She had to get out. She tilted up her head and started trying to push her tongue through the ventilation slits; maybe, if she could break it, she could bite away the rest of the plastic with her teeth. No, plastic bends, it doesn't break. Maybe, if she could just get turned around, she could wedge the thing open with her back. No, the straps were holding her in position. Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

She opened her mouth and screamed through her hoarse throat. All it did was steam up the ungiving face-mask of the thing. The basement was made of concrete and sound didn't carry to the house above.

She closed her eyes for another sickly deposit of Hughie's blood.

She was surprised that it was taking so long to dry. Though his head had been full of the stuff; fuller than she would have imagined.

His body had slipped down onto the floor about a minute after he died and the revolver lay somewhere near him where it had landed. If she forced her pupils into the corners of her eyes so much that it hurt she could just make out the vague shape of his darkly dressed figure in her peripheral vision. Hughie had always worn

dark clothes, tight jeans that did nothing for his flabby thighs and distended beer-gut, and motorcycle leathers that stood testament to his mid-life crisis. That was all part of the turn on; Julie remembered. The guy with the keys to the locks had to be a real loser. A badly dressed, plain-looking, overweight, Mama's boy. Hughie had met every criteria. He was out of shape and out of touch. But Julie hadn't quite understood that he was out of his mind as well.

After they'd tied her down and locked up the plexiglas suit Hughie had leaned down and pressed his fat lips against the air-holes. For a moment she thought about whether the pressure of his damp flesh would be enough to cut off the oxygen. She leaned up and kissed him through the vents; she was fucking pissed at that. Her body crept and turned under her skin; she wanted to be free so she could kick his baggy ass. She'd told him: *no kissing*.

But then, that was the game.

It didn't matter what she wanted. It mattered what this loser wanted; because he had the keys to the locks and he could leave her inside there, staring out from plastic, for as long as he liked. The thought of it drove Julie crazy with lust. She moved her body; rubbing her erect nipples against the cold insides of her prison. Begging Hughie, the free guy, the guy with the keys, to use her body like he had so many times before.

Hughie looked at her with those sad, dripping, blood-hound eyes. Christ she fucking hated him.

"Julie," he said, the corners of his mouth sagging and pensive.

"Use your hand," she instructed, pushing her crotch up against the custom-made entrance to the device.

"No, Julie," he looked in pain, "I just want to talk."

"Use your hand," she repeated, "I swear I'll kick your ass when I get out of here. Use your fucking hand."

"Julie, I'm in *love* with you."

The words had come from Hughie so quickly he'd barely thought about how they'd sound. Julie just stared at him; less pitying and more disgusted.

"I do Julie," he assured her, "and I don't want to do this anymore. I never did. It makes me..."

Fuck, thought Julie. Is Mama's boy going to cry?

"It makes me feel sick Julie." He said, turning his eyes away from her, "it's wrong and it isn't what you want. It *can't* be."

She breathed onto the plastic; steaming up the apparatus. She refused to talk about romance with this tub of shit. He wasn't her *boyfriend*. She didn't have *boyfriends*. Shit, he wasn't even a man to her. Just 300 pounds

of blubber who was *supposed* to be acting like a jailer, who was supposed to hold the keys and get what he wanted out of her; to use her, to humiliate her, to make her beg to get out into the real world.

"Can I let you out?" He asked, "you can get dressed and we can go out some place. A bar maybe. Or a movie."

Julie couldn't help but laugh. Her flesh was prickling wildly. Her sex was a whirring coil of barbed-wire sensations itching, screaming, to be fulfilled and all this bastard wanted to talk about was the fucking *movies*.

"Let me the hell out of here," she ordered, "then you can get the fuck out of my house. We're through with this shit. I'll just have to find a guy who's got the balls to go all the way."

It was then Hughie removed the .44 calibre revolver from his leathers. A twinge of fear had glittered in Julie's eyes. Then he pushed the barrel up against his skull; the circle of metal wrinkling into his loose skin as he pressed down harder.

"There's not going to be another guy, Julie," he said, "I love you so much."

Julie didn't know she'd insulated so well. But no one even heard the gunshot.

Death is a wall at the far end of life; and life, a string of indignities before the wall.

Julie had stopped pushing hours ago at the immovable innards of a device she'd built for pleasure. She laughed, her tears washing away channels in Hughie's dry blood. One minute a sex-toy the next a coffin. She laughed louder. More raucously. Then hysterical; bashing her limbs against the plastic until they bruised.

After awhile she stopped. She lay still on her back and wondered how long it would take to die. So cruel. So terribly cruel that the suit was so clear. She could see the whole world perfectly. The whole, real, glimmering world, beyond that inch-and-a-half that separated her from it; that wouldn't let her move and that would starve her to death, naked in that cold, sordid little basement.

She remembered the window in her bedroom, at her Aunt Celia's house, in Michigan. How clean that window was. How well she could see the boxelder maples outside; their seedpods like the wings of sleeping dragonflies on each green shoot.

She swivelled her eyes in her agonised sockets. Hughie's bleeding black shape was still only in her periphery; but somehow it was huge and dark now.

She could remember a shape like that; hovering in the doorway of a child's bedroom in Michigan. It had

worn dark clothes too, but after midnight only dark underwear, part covered by its hanging white belly. Julie remembered the child, her last glances of the dragonfly wings, and how close the world was, the real world, outside that house.

She remembered a shadow that was a man's hand clamp down over frightened eyes, blotting out the beautiful trees, she remembered the body. The thing. She remembered pain and not being able to move in the stifling heat. Bound. Constricted. Completely at the mercy of something she didn't understand.

And, afterwards. Used. Humiliated. Longing to be free.





THE EASTERING POETRY BY GREGORY James WYRICK

Gloom doom
Of the last jewels-
Plucked the prize
Right from the devil's eyes.

Aborted and tried
To tombs of formaldehyde
Like the broken and quivering
Gifts from an angry god.

Pale bloated orbs;
The wet and red dead
End appendages plotted- cold
Vinegar blossom artifacts
Showering amniotic thresholds...

Lingering, fermenting until their collapse-
Under this cloak of anchorite imprisonment,
Behind this dark exhibiting glass.

Where even their deaths
They shall outlast.

CANNIBAL BOX

slight return to
blushing morning
breeding callow
in my porcelain bones

sharp and narrow
I am warmed in the wearing
of her voice cuz I know
how she devours her own

oh yes
amid this mess, sweet bliss-
this sex dons claws and teeth
and breathes out its black breath

and spits and spits and splits
the center of blue spaces where
we're tempered in endless deterioration

this ledger of affliction bound in tears.
we're fitted in a muzzle of scars
and a shroud of miserable years

scattered in a murder blur,
collecting in a ouija urn
of words to woo
some queen Eden down
from her lunar tower tomb

back into cruel darkness' stare
back into ecstasy of lecherous and heavenly atrocities
back into where
her beauty is bare.

ONCE NEVER WAS

By 3 they come, 5X a day.

They wander restless in endless relay
yet can never escape...
the gouging of all sensory.

the emanating decay.

the dark avatar embrace
that shakes the dead awake.

Oh! the white-hot ghosts that lead
their veils of tears through seething years.
Abandoned bodies shed, left to mold in their beds
They are revealed.

In the parchment-thin porcelain skin reflecting its putrid turn.

In the shrieking shroud that concealed
the loathsome discern of what once was human.
The heaven-purged that have hell to burn.

They slip their skin for the lord's bloodstock
just before the constrictions begin.
Silently, they arise in darkness-
Immaculate atrocity

DEAD & GONE

BY TRAVIS CHAPMAN

If I close my eyes does that make me blind?

To ignore the world for what it really is.

But even if I suppressed it all, you're always with me.

Inside the dark of my now broken mind.

Your voice took the sanity I had left within.

I tried to convince myself you died long ago.

But it never seemed to take form inside my being.

I still see the ghost of my pasts in the dead of night.

From those times I held you and said I'll never leave.

But that was a promise that couldn't be kept.

When Fate severed our lives and casted you aside.

Now the spot beside me is no longer warm.

Red Elixir

By Travis Chapman

The crimson liquid flowing down

I lay there, dreaming of leaving,

she can stop me if she truly wishes.

But, her heart is lost to me.

I stood there with open arms

I was shadowed by a boy,

she fell in love with him.

He was never worth her heart.

As I open my eyes the gashes still leaking

her name is still on my chilling lips.

I take in my final mortal breath

and leave this dark to start anew.

GRAFFITI OF THE GROTESQUE

BY

















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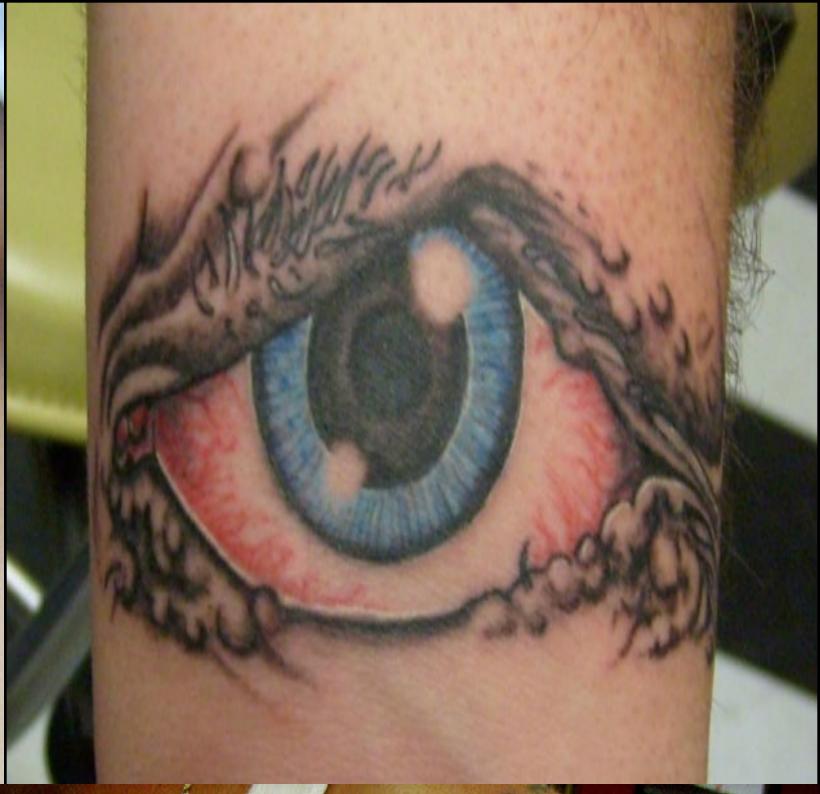
FLESH AND BLOOD



Tat Art by <http://50lbhead.deviantart.com/>



Tat Art by <http://50lbhead.deviantart.com/>





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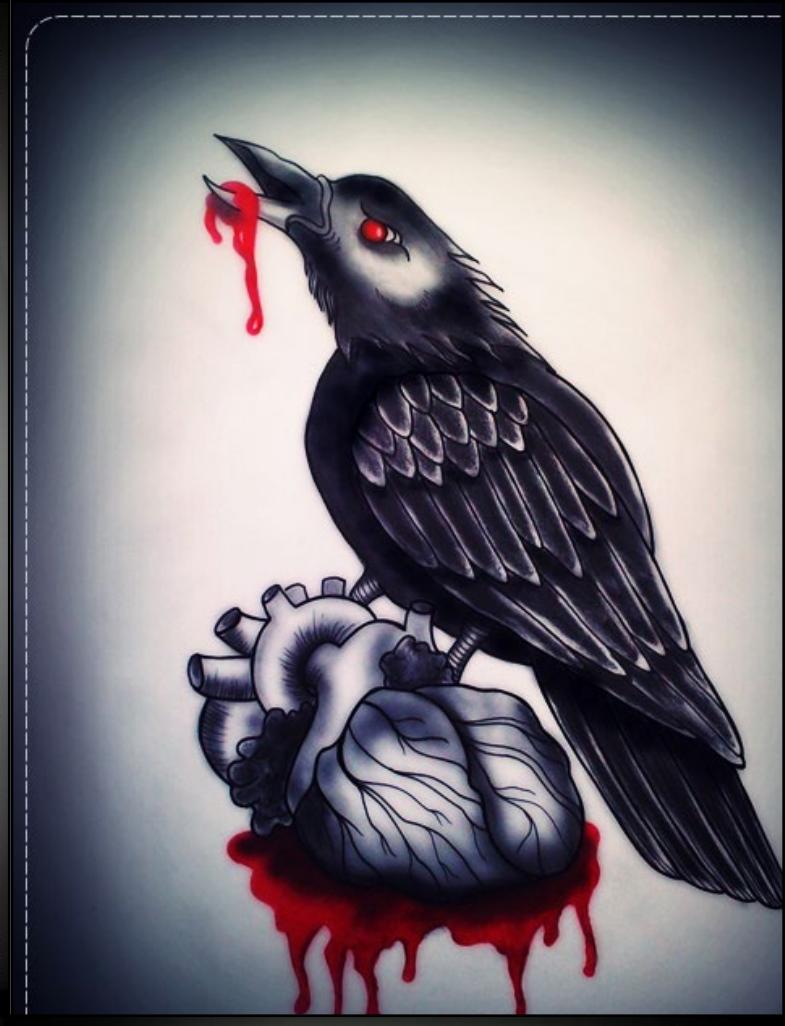


MWeiss



MWeiss







Sermons of My Childhood

Joseph Lambach

Ding.

The elevator doors roll open and I'm stepping in, pressing buttons, watching lights fade in and out. First to the sixth floor, and then a slow stop, no jerking, and the doors open slowly. Walking, reading the numbers in my head, door after door looking for the one magic number.

The random intervals of windows and I'm looking outside, the sun fading beneath the reds and pinks. Reflecting on the water, a secondary sun, temporarily blinding me as I glance towards it.

Knock-knock-knocking.

The peep hole goes white to black for a few seconds and then white again. The door creaks open and John looks around.

"Come in." He swats at fly *buzzing* near one of his gauged ears.

I step over two liter bottles and yellow-stained t-shirts.

"Sorry about the mess, I was about to start picking all this shit up," he says.

"Don't worry about it," I say. "You should see my life."

I stare at the pictures and posters on the wall, covered in a haze, a glow inside the room. The neon marijuana leaves and glow-in-the-dark Bob Marleys everywhere. "One shit hole you've got, John. But, not bad."

"Thanks." He sits down on the chair and waits for me to copycat him.

My knees creak and pop sitting down, young age catching up.

"You look beautiful," he says.

"Thanks."

There's nowhere to hide from pot-culture images and dead-for-so-long eyes.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"Nothing, tired, you know, same old bullshit as always."

He's tying a hospital sized rubber band around my arm, tapping at the veins, looking for a hint of blue.

"What are we doing this time?" I ask.

"Your choice really. I've got pretty much everything you want."

"At this point, does it really fucking matter?" I nod at the counter. "Surprise me."

"Okay. You sure?"

"Yeah, whatever's going to work. I don't give a shit."

He looks down at the torn skin and newly healing scars. "That looks like a real bitch. I'm going to hook you up real good this time."

I looked away and listen to the tapping of keratin on plastic, and then the burn of a skinny metal needle going into my vein.

"What is it?" I ask.

"Morphine, with a kick in the ass. You know. A real booster." John's pushing the concoction into my veins. "South American shit I got from a buddy up in Knoxville last week."

The room's fading in and out, and Bible verses passages are blinking in my head like an alarm clock. Dad's sermons are flooding my mind. Green and gray honeycombs begin to take over, a small hole in the middle and I can see John pulling the needle back out.

My head suspends uncontrollably mid fall, my arms paralyzed. Other than blood and the pulse of my heart there's no other feeling.

I'm back in rural Georgia staring up from a swing set, watching Dad through the second story window. His old face scrunched up around a pipe, glowing red with each inhale of cheap American tobacco. Both my hands grab the chains and I'm swaying with the wind, slowly moving my legs back and forth.

It's senior year of high school and I'm just sitting there, swinging, watching. Graduation's two weeks away and I'm almost on my period. The cramps aren't bad yet, and the blood from the natural cycle will be there in a few days. Replacing old blood from a rip - from loosing my virginity.

Fading and fading, then I'm hiding behind the church bus' wheel, Tom Dryer whispering in my ear, "Are you smooth as a porn star?"

"What?"

"Are you smooth," half a smile creeping up the left side of his face, "or do preacher's daughters not shave?"

I could feel loose lawnmower-thrown gravel digging into my ass and the tire's dry-rot dusting my back. My face warm, mouth sticky with spit and lust.

Jeopardy questions and Wheel of Fortune phrases never prepared me for this. "I don't know, I didn't know people shaved down there."

There's cheap whiskey-breath hot in my ear and Tom says, "Let me feel, I've always wanted to know what the preacher's daughter was really like."

His long callused fingers inching up my thigh, under the elastic of conservative underwear. I'm grabbing his triceps, squeezing all the sin I could into his arm.

"Relax," another hot whisper, rebellious teen-aged hormones mixed with mental images of Jesus, bearded and serene, on a cross. Unsure which was more embarrassing, the mess of pubic hair or how wet I was.

He's pulling my hand into his pants, erect and full. I'm watching his lips move, surveying each crevice. Every pick of bra fabric and my nipples are on fire.

Prayers of forgiveness already run through my head.

The dull flicker of a single incandescent bulb and I'm back in John's room, blinking, regaining consciousness. Two hundred count sheets and John is passed out, face down in a lake of drool and a ripped pillow.

Standing up, there's a crick in my neck and turning right feels impossible. I begin to reach for John and shake him awake, but there are no fingers, no hands to work with. I stand up and walk back to the door.

Opening the door handle with nothing more than nubs is tricky, especially with no feeling in my severed veins and skin. But it's only a step in the recovery process.

"Recovery is simply readjusting to life. Overcoming your obstacles with a little improv is all." My therapist said six weeks into physical therapy.

Six weeks into trying to live my life again.

"Okay, that's easy when you're on the ordering side of this bullshit. My arms don't even want to respond when I need to push off the bed, and you're talking about fucking improv." I wanted to kick him in the balls.

"That's a regression Suzanne. That's back to step two and you know it."

"Whatever. Fuck your steps."

Cold wind blowing and I'm back outside. I'm a dead girl walking the streets of southern Georgia.

My wrists and scars are stuffed deep in my jacket pockets, fighting the urge for sympathy. The streets are homeless shelters this close to John's apartment, and Oil-War vets line the sidewalks around metal barrels and open flames.

My youngest memories of southern Georgia were flat open fields, shotguns mounted on truck cabin racks and Disney boycotts. The first twelve years we ate nothing but brown-sugar-sweetened oatmeal drowned in two percent milk every morning. Peanut butter and jelly every night. Lunch never being an option.

We sat together for all mandatory meals and talked about God and His blessings. We were never lucky, only blessed. To eat what God provided.

Dad never skimmed the offering plate for anything extra, but I developed a slight of hand for five and ten dollar bills. Anything larger was noticeable.

A small church filled with civil war reenactment enthusiasts who never said more than “Amen” at the end of a prayer. Sunday mornings and nights we were at church, in the same pew, warming the same worn down padding.

Being the first born daughter meant long skirts and conservative blouses. Starring in front of me, pretending to be the perfect example of a preacher’s kid, I gritted my teeth and dazed in and out of listening to the monotony of sinners in Hell. My only thought was getting home and finger fucking myself.

A two story parsonage censored me and my two younger brothers from the rest of the world, a safe zone of PBS television and Touched By an Angel reruns.

Freshman year of high school and Mr. Rogers was my go-to fantasy most nights. Sweaters and puppets, a safety net I knew.

Halloween night that year, after dinner by candle light, it had been two hours since I last masturbated. Behind a shower curtain, with the faucet running, low in the old claw-foot tub deep enough to drown our family of five, I hid there in embarrassment. Naked and vulnerable, bolts of electricity fly through my body as I caressed myself to orgasm.

A self-indulgent volcano erupted, Christian rebellion at its finest. A giant “fuck-you” to Dad and Mom and our church.

I bit my lips to suppress the feelings my mind, body, and soul wanted to scream in pleasure.

Feeling sick came first. Puking French Vanilla colored coffee was the icing on the cake. Forgiveness and devotions came next. Time to read my Bible, talk to God, pray. Dad always made sure we were doing our daily devotions. It was a Lancaster thing – do not miss a day with God and He won’t miss a day with you.

No matter how many Sunday sermons of fire and brimstone, I compulsively masturbated. Not skipping a day, never resting on the Sabbath. No matter how many weeks we all faithfully dropped dollar bills and checks in to the wooden offering plates, I was horny. Always.

Mom and Dad must have only fucked missionary three times. I never saw condoms in our Wal-Mart cart. Birth-control pills were a straight ticket to the fiery pits of hell.

Unafraid of setting the example with his family, Dad would look down at me from the pulpit and tell me to quit drawing, Suzanne, pay attention.

Most people simply called him Brother. Terms of affection ran deep in the South, and everyone knew they needed to buy their way to God through Thomas Lancaster. Over six feet tall, dressed in sports coats and jeans, he was a man after God’s own heart.

Public school was never an option, and I spent most days sitting at a shit desk studying the Christian homeschool Algebra or Biology. Even the fucking drawings were gender neutral, never anatomically correct.

I learned about the G spot secretly reading in a corner of the public library, my back to a wall, able to see anyone approaching me. Mom never questioned my book selection, or saw the occasional Cosmopolitan hidden in my backpack.

Black and white prints of James Stewart and Paul Newman were stashed away behind my Cabbage Patch collection. Lying in bed at night and two hours after Mom and Dad finally closed their door, by star light, my fingers cramped and my conscience burned. I couldn’t resist the images of family-appropriate movie stars from the forties and my hormones.

According to Dad, this was cheating on the husband I had not yet married.

The rest of winter break I masturbated in my own sinful thoughts and fantasies. The rest of winter break I kept praying. The shame God already knew about, Dad’s sermons on pre-marital sex and my own guilt reverberated in my brain.

The temple was ravished, destroyed. I had not saved myself, saved my virginity for anyone. I was a selfish little saint that everyone complimented. A standup daughter the every Southern Baptist preacher would have been proud of to have as their own.



Freshman year, Brewton-Parker College, and I had learned to shave my pussy. Sometimes I left a landing strip, but most of the time it was clean and smooth. I found a special lotion at CVS that kept the red little mosquito bites from popping up.

Every semester a minimum of twelve chapels, and after every God-hates-sinners-and-sex lecture I dropped my shoulders and hid in my room and masturbated. A hole burning into my skull, knowing there were omnipotent eyes judging me for my dirty little pleasure.

My fingers became stained with the smell of fish and copper pennies. But most people pretended not to notice.

I stood up in all my Bible classes and regurgitated childhood knowledge. Vomited verses and cliché catechisms Mom had drilled into my brain in elementary school.

My GPA usually hovered around three point five, but never broke point seven.

I found out who was actually smoking pot on campus, what computer

nerds were secretly dirty little Southern Baptist freelance sinners.

John Michaels, a fucking computer genius with a Prince Albert, told me about his geeky porn collection. I asked him if he could download any old black and white movies. "You know, like It's a Wonderful Life or Gone With the Wind?"

"Sure. I can burn them to DVD if you want."

"Yeah, that'd be cool."

"Just come by later and I'll have a couple for you."

That night Casablanca played on the DVD player next to his bed and when As Time Goes By came on my thong was soaking wet. John was oblivious till I started shaking in my seat, crossing my legs, rubbing my thighs together.

"Are you tense?" He stopped tossing popcorn in his mouth and reached for my shoulders.

My eyes were only half open and I nodded no. The smell of Brut and butter, and his greasy fingers dug into my shoulders.

Cheap romance and I placed his right hand inside my wet underwear. "Do you want to taste it?"

I stared at Humphrey Bogart and John was a dog lapping at my pussy.

We were a kaleidoscope of skin on skin. His eyelashes fluttered against my nose and I dug my chewed-on fingernails into his back. I called him Rick.

"Who?"

"Rick, from the movie, Casablanca. Looking-at-you Rick?" I could feel his balls slapping me and I arched my back.

"Oh, okay." He lightly tugged at my hair, and every follicle on my body stood up. "Well Ricky-boy it is." Breathing. Sweating. Hoping the wrath of God wasn't about to pop my heart, and John was the

gentleman movie magic of the past I so desperately craved.

Ten minutes later it was over, and I was stumbling back to my room. Feeling his semen dripping back out of me into the stitching of my high ride mommy jeans. I kept my eyes open and uttered a quick prayer of forgiveness. A prayer of transgressions.

Three times a week, and I was in John's room, reliving each orgasm, reliving my vulnerabilities and desires.

I still couldn't stop masturbating when I was alone.

Ring. Ring-ring. Ring. I stopped for telephones. The paranoia that someone knew, was calling to tell me about my sin. Someone had seen me through the tiny holes the nylon cords ran though. Whispering a quick prayer before answering.

"Hello?"

"Hey, sweetie, it's Mom."

"Hey." I flipped pages of books, background noise to make college realistic.

"How's class going?"

"It's good, just cramming for a Psych midterm right now." I glanced around for my class schedule, wondering if I was even taking that class. "Actually about to walk over to the library right before the phone rang."

"Oh, that's good, your Dad says 'Hello'."

"Tell him I said hey."

A pause and a distant mumble. "He says he's been praying for you, we both have, we know how hard it must be for you. Even there at Brewton."

"Oh, don't worry about me, nothing's changed since I left home." I stared at the yellow and blue pillow cover next to me. "You guys taught me priorities."

"That's good to hear, any boys?"

"No, just trying to focus on class..."

"Oh, good, glad to hear it. Did you hear about Deacon Jim? They found..."

I tuned out, lightly scribbling in the notebook on the desk. Mom's voice an incoherent babble of church and other bullshit I no longer cared about. Names I could no longer put faces too.

"It was just horrible, you know..."

"Uh huh." Not sure why I even nodded my head yes.

I pressed *play* on the DVD player, volume on mute. James Stewart was pulling a lever and mouthing the words *Hot Dog!*.

"Sorry, Mom, I hate to cut you off, but I've got to get over to the library and find a good spot. You know, before too many people get there."

I felt the juices beginning to flow as I watched James' lips curl as he spoke. The wet spot kept growing every second.

"Ok honey, call us when you can."

"Ok, I will."

"I love you."

"Love you too."

I clicked the phone down before Mom's notorious "Buh-bye" and spread my legs. The guilt burned my face red, washed out with climax, and then I was on my knees praying for forgiveness.

Dad had to be right, I must be a sinner. God must hate me. I must be God-damned by this point. But praying was the only way I knew to make it right.

Senior year of college I discovered the benefits of Ritalin and Adderall. Socially and scholastically. A shit job at Kohl's making minimum wage was ninety percent whatever magic drugs I could get, ten percent living. John Michaels ran a supply chain after he graduated, keeping Brewton-Parker faithful to Jesus and little white and orange miracle workers.

Dad had taught me God hated pill-poppers and druggies. I prayed even more that year, hoping to buy

my way back towards redemption.

Eyes closed and headphones on, masturbating, listening to lines from a Paul Newman movie. Elvis at times. A cop or in the army. Either way, it was natural ecstasy.

I went to class and listened to lectures on Biblical prophecies and September Eleventh. Watched Chemistry teachers burn this and that acid and flames changed colors. Left class and hid in the farthest stall from the door, fingering myself to orgasm with ear buds in and old static-y recordings of Mick Jagger screaming in my ear

The guilt washed over me, more and more each day. God was right and I was wrong.

We studied Catholic priests from the Middle Ages who practiced flagellation, flogging themselves with whips for their transgressions. I was Southern Baptist through and through but maybe the only way to stop my sinful desires, to stop feeling the need for forgiveness was to adopt that Middle Aged philosophy of self-mutilation, self-redemption, self-salvation.

Maybe Dad was right, maybe Hell was knocking on my door. Maybe Mr. Death was waiting to sweep me away during a climax, ship me off to boarding school in some fiery pit in the middle of earth. Maybe my thoughts and transgressions were my ticket away from God. Away from those thousands waiting at the pearly gates.

"Stop me if you've heard this one before," Dr. Kurlack stroked his white chin, a hundred years of not trimming.

"But, Catholics don't recognize Protestants, Protestants don't recognize Catholics, and Southern Baptists don't recognize each other at the liquor store."

From the back row, I laughed. We all laughed.

The irony of the truth was pretty clear at this point. We all knew it. Fucked up from the night before, I sat far enough back so no one would smell the hangover.

I closed my eyes and prayed, tried to talk to God.

I really am sorry. I really do need forgiveness.

I went to my dorm room and masturbated two times after class. With enough time to spare for twenty minutes of lunch.

My wrist hurt, it burned. I thought about years in the past, Dad and his sermons, droning on and on, endless offers of salvation, of God's forgiveness. It hurt like a motherfucker, every time I felt guilty, every time I began to cry, every time I lied to myself and said it would be the last. Every time I thought about those old movies.

Locked in my room, hiding from God, I tried to block out the years of Dad preaching at me, giving me every answer, informing me of how I should understand God and his faith. Boston played on the radio and fear of being found out overwhelmed me into a barrage of tears.

Thursday night, two weeks before commencement, John had supplied me with top notch cocaine. Snorting the white powder, my whole body was numb.

I had driven home to hide in Dad's little Southern Baptist parking lot. To hide in the shadows of burnt out street lights. John sat next to me, fucked up, and one eye open the other closed. I couldn't feel my legs or arms.

The tingling sensation of fucked up and horny mixed with alcohol. I snorted three crushed Adderalls from the top of an old CD case.

My arm burned with pains I couldn't feel this numb. The guilt crept up inside me, my vagina burned, my eyes burned, my heart burned with God in the back of my head.

There was no relief anymore.

Dad was right beyond any doubt. God would never love a sinner like me. The devil would embrace me with arms wide open.

The radio quietly played some oldies station that Mom had occasionally let me put on the radio when I was kid. The nostalgia of innocence and not knowing how fucked up the world really was washed over me. A fucking freight train of it plowed right into my heart, my body burned with self-loathing.

I reached up for the key still in the ignition and turned until the rumble of the engine gave away the

sound of the car starting.

"Where we going Suzanne?"

"Somewhere." I stared at headlights and matched them up with the white dashes separating the lanes.
"The train tracks."

"Um, okay." His headed nodded back down and I turned the radio up.

The street lamps began to fade in the rearview and I lit a cigarette, trying to steady my heart beat.
Looking for the trusted signs of a rail road crossing.

Driving, driving, driving and the world was me and John and set of head lights reflecting trees and mile markers. Searching for the glow of a yellow circle and black X. John's moving next to me and I feel his hand creeping around my thigh. I'm looking and watching.

My foot is heavy and I'm still looking and John's head is flopping around on his chest, his neck a rubber spring. My mind's racing and I'm feeling light headed and thirsty and dehydrated, and the world is a black envelope waiting to ship me away to some foreign country. Snakes are waving above the car, licking the windshield, and my knuckles are white, and I'm gripping the car. Accelerating, accelerating, and the air horn of some distant train is circling around somewhere, and God's pressing fast forward and I'm racing down the old road.

The cows are staring and I'm *Moo-ing* at them and yelling at them "Fuck off!" And I'm looking and glancing back and forth from rearview to the yellow sign. The wind is seeping through the cracked window, playing tether ball games with my eyes, drying tears as quickly as they appear. I'm swatting at the heat, fanning it away from my face, and the world is a freight train getting bigger and bigger in the rearview mirror. I'm sailing full speed ahead while pictures of Mom and Dad and me and my brothers are clouding the top half of my eyes. John's rolling and tumbling in his chair, his seatbelt playing choking games with his throat. And I'm slapping him, slapping his face, punching his jaw. Trying to wake him up.

The brakes screech underneath the car, and I'm ripping and swatting at the seat belt trying to unwrap the tangle of flesh and nylon, rubbing my face raw and red, and the taste of salty copper is trickling into my mouth. I'm running, and watching the train, waiting for the lights to catch up with me. Struggling to put one foot in front of the other. And the horn is blaring as the lights are flashing and dinging in my ears. The lights are growing bigger and bigger, faster and faster, and I'm laying down.

I'm looking for God, hoping to see an angel or a beard somewhere. And the train is blaring its horn and I'm putting my arms in front of me, across the cold, rumbling metal. I'm spitting blood and the horns are growing louder and louder. Biting my lower lip and my finger tips are shoveling gravel and my nails are coming loose. I'm waiting.

The hard chiseling vibration of metal on bone, the noisy gusts of metal wheels ring in my ears.

I was a dead girl living in Southern Georgia, my mind blacked out, every nerve ending overrun with thousands of pain-ants. Marching one by one, up and down my body.

Everything was finally numbed by the relief of years and years of guilt gone.

I was a warrior princess at last, streaks of thick red pumping and spurting from severed veins, crushed and splintered bones scraping the gravel.

My body's moving backwards a few inches. It's midnight and cold.

The *woosh-woosh* of wheels churning by, the wind in my face. I'm on some gravel road, and then there's silence and no feeling anymore.

I'm a dead girl sleeping somewhere in southern Georgia.

Graduation never happened that semester.

But self-redemption did.

I woke up in a hospital bed with burning, non-existent hands. There were bandages covering nubs eight inches below my elbows.

I prayed to God and asked for forgiveness. A temple severely wounded from an inability to control myself. An inability to learn from anything I had ever been taught. An inability to take the narrow path.

The beeping monitors synced with my heart rate were the only people in my room. White walls and

sterile equipment gleaned in the dim hospital lights. The smell of medical shit layered itself, never really leaving the room.

I began focusing and the TV was playing Douglas news. The evening edition with the best stories, the best town gossip I could talk to Mom about.

I closed my eyes and smiled. The bitter-sweet taste of finally becoming the role-model daughter that would no longer sin. That would not secretly disappoint an unknowing father.

The female news anchor's voice, deep for such a small frame, read the teleprompter headlines, "...after containing the fire, the only injury was a Truck Nine firefighter hospitalized and treated for smoke inhalation and minor first degree burns."

I looked left and a morphine drop fell into the IV line. My eyes fluttered open and closed, and I was waiting for dreams to take me away again. The voice of the news anchor a lullaby. The drugs were my counting-sheep.

It was time to prepare for following the footsteps of Dad and righting all the wrong in my life.

"Coming up, on the news at eight, a shocking story..."

My eye lids fluttered open and closed, it felt almost cinematic, and I smiled. Finally ready to embrace the world and God and sermons of my childhood.

"...Thomas Lancaster, Southern Baptist preacher from Douglas, Georgia, arrested in a prostitution sting after allegedly soliciting an undercover male police officer for sex three blocks away from the church he has pastored for the past twenty four years. All this and more on Chanel Five, your source for the truth."

I could feel the tears trying to fight their way free, my mind trying to piece together the information. There had to be another Thomas Lancaster somewhere.

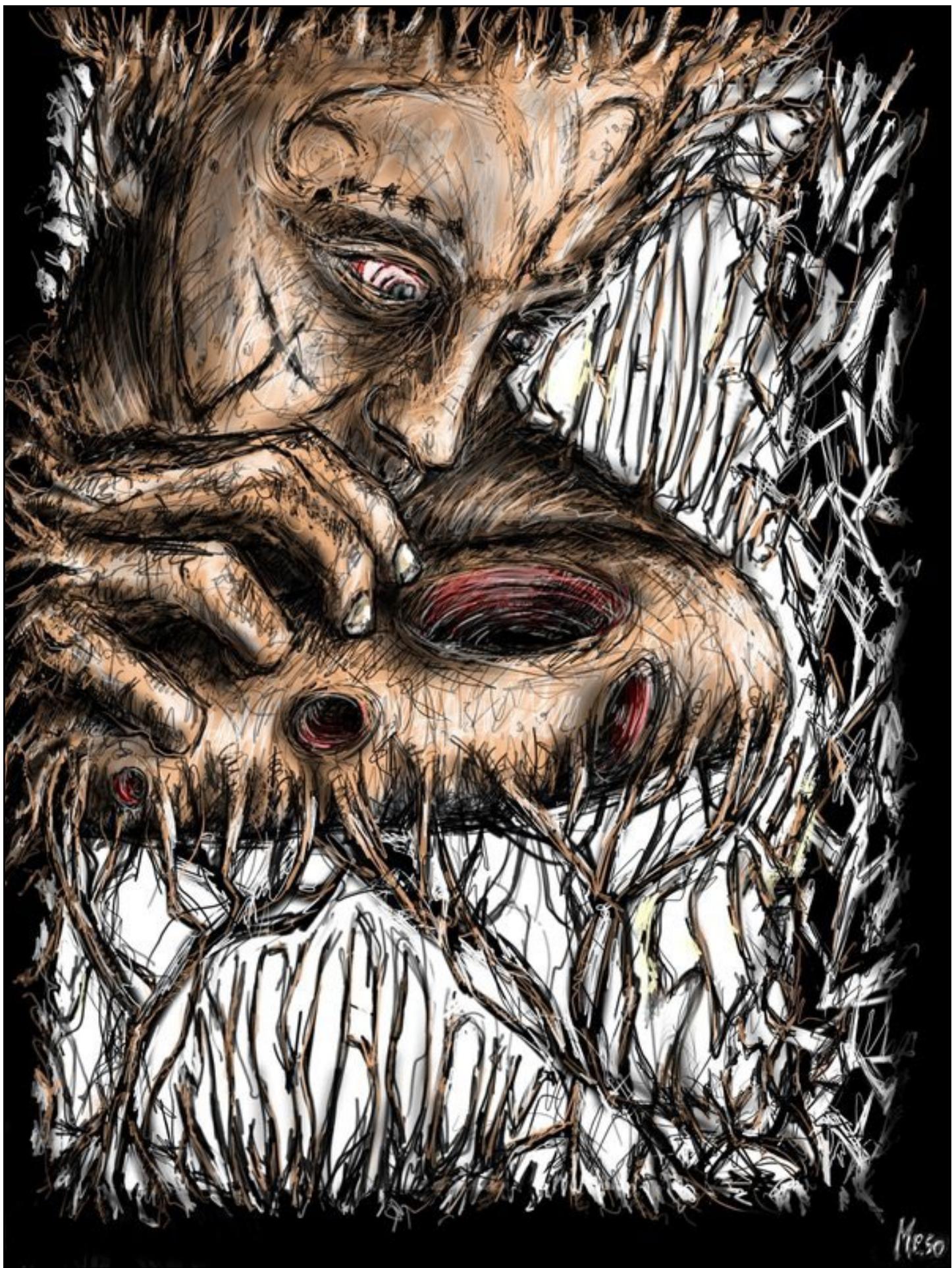
The morphine, a paralysis of black dreams and sunshine, forced my eyes closed. In and out, I listened as an old movie started to play somewhere in the distance.

Fading, fading, fading and words looped through my head.

And remember, this gun is pointed right at your heart.



Joseph Lambach is married and the father of two. Besides his family, his biggest passion is reading and writing. He works a regular day job fixing avionic equipment on helicopters, and then writing at night whatever he can get out of his head and onto paper. He currently lives in Southern California and working on his first novel.



<http://mesozord.deviantart.com/>



Ophelia's Stream

Rhiannon Thorne

I'm building a canoe of bones,
it is mostly airtight with my dead bag skin
stretching paper thin about it.
I've found a way to proceed with
my split-blister oar arms, to push and pull me
like breath in the breeze;
battling the current is a simple losing thing.

I've wrapped nap sacks full of poetry, and
like a good railroad bum, Emily Bronte has taken herself along;
Heathcliff, don't miss me, Heathcliff,
I'm tucking my tongue in and it can't tell you
you're dead
you're dead
you're dead and I'm on the river again
feeding teeth to the fish.

There is a vagabond in my blood,
peddling my liver, the color of dried roses,
to the bottle on my ribcage bench.
Come and buy yourself a picture, come and see
a body built into something new, come
and see how hair floats like lilies. A human boat
is a beautiful thing;

There's a peace to drift such
bathing in Ophelia's stream.

CRAWL BITCH CRAWL



Horror Film “CRAWL BITCH CRAWL” Releases the Official Teaser Trailer!

The HORROR film CRAWL BITCH CRAWL is...

Synopsis: An elite security team assigned the task of protecting the last known woman who can become pregnant, find themselves caught in an endless claustrophobic underground tunnel system. The team soon learns - the real horror is not the unstoppable force chasing them, but the ever growing smaller tunnel itself. The will to live for each member of the team gets challenged with the obstacle of a fourteen inch two thousand foot tunnel.

What horror fans are saying about the CRAWL BITCH CRAWL Teaser Trailer...

“...A Fist-Clenching, Breath-Holding, Claustrophobic Thrill-Ride...” [-Yell! Magazine \(Joanna Jaguar\)](#)

For More Press Quotes, visit the [PRESS PAGE](#) at our official website www.crawlmovie.com

Visit [YOUTUBE](#) ...and get your BITCH ON!

To View More Images and Behind the Scenes Images - [CLICK HERE](#).

Release Date for the movie CRAWL BITCH CRAWL is still TBD -- for now you can follow these sites for updates and find out more information on the film.

Website: www.crawlmovie.com

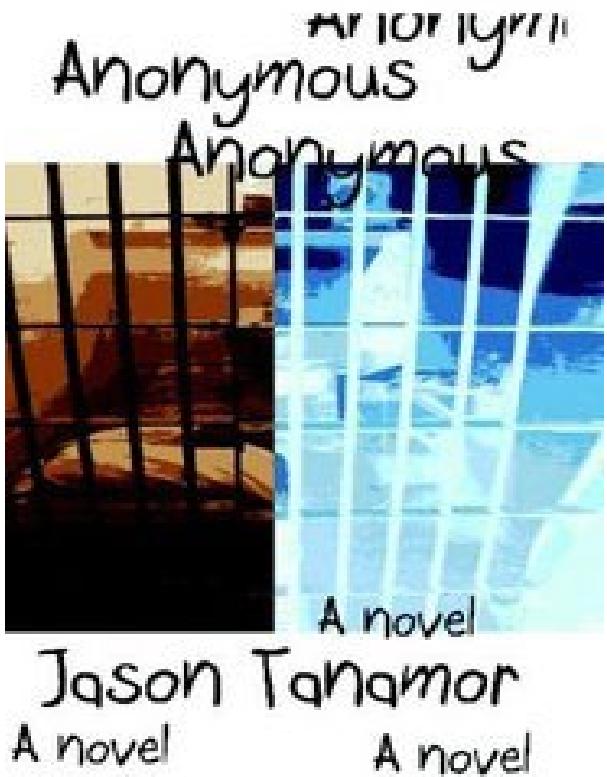
Facebook: www.facebook.com/CRAWLMovie

Twitter: www.twitter.com/EXTREMEINDIE

CRAWL BITCH CRAWL is a full length feature film due out in 2012/2013.

Directed By: Oklahoma Ward Written By: Oklahoma Ward Starring: Nicole Alonso, Torey Byrne, Tom Chamberlain, David P. Baker, Wil Crown, Tommy Ball, Clayton Burgess

SOCIOPATH'S BOOK CLUB: BOOKS FOR THOSE ON ANTI-DEPRESSANTS

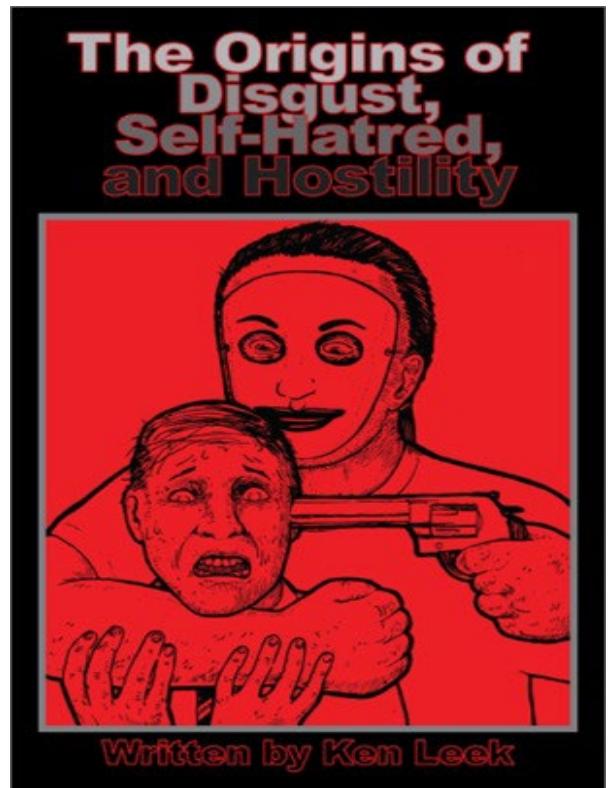


"Anonymous" by Jason Tanamor is a novel told through the perspective of various prison inmates as they serve out their sentences. It's the ultimate in unreliable narration because who is more inclined to lie than convicts. However, there is a sad, cynical truth to the tales of these "anonymous nobodies" who life has thrown away because they aren't celebrity criminals or important productive members of society. The story is told to us through one main Anonymous whose career as a nobody wanting to be somebody is cut short after he is caught for impersonating a celebrity agent to get free drinks and food at classy Hollywood restaurants one too many times. There are some really gross anecdotes in these pages such as when a pedophile states that the best thing about being with kids is that their little hands make your dick look bigger. Or the barfly slut with throat chymadia. It's a vicious look at a nihilistic society that doesn't really give a shit, that preaches naivety and corruption almost simultaneously. It's like watching Justin Bieber getting sodomized by a group of large black men, it's disturbing but also a little funny at the same time.

Dear Cerebral Cortex,

I'm sorry I blew our my brain synapses by reading this disgusting and harrowing look at life on the streets full of disgusting and grim detail. Furthermore, my hypothalamus is rather bruised from all the brutal imagery and disgusting filth that I've read about in excruciating details. My serotonin levels have been severely depleted from the constant barrage of negative imagery and yet I could not stop. This story about a young runaway named Mike Hollister in San Diego, California is more brutal than most films about drug addiction. It doesn't make it seem cool or glamourous or fun. We see the seedy underbelly of prostitutes, drug addicts, the mentally ill and learn just how far people will go to survive when pushed to their absolute limit. Just grab a bottle of Scotch, some Vicodin and your anti-depressant of choice and read this wonderfully grotesque novel of social ills.

Sincerely Yours,
Central Nervous System





THE EVIL THAT MEN DO

By Kent Miller

Part 1

"The evil that men do lives after them; The good is oft interred with their bones". Act 3, Scene II – *Julius Caesar* by William Shakespeare

The Victorian mansion that nestled within the thick circle of scrub brush and oak trees once was a place of happiness. Built in the 1880's by a prosperous family whose name is only remembered in the family cemetery, its halls once echoed with laughter, hymns, and song. But then Tuberculosis swept Europe, and the patriarch of the family returned from France only to bring death to his own family. People that might have helped them shunned the house and for good reason, so no aid was forthcoming that might have saved them. So the father sent for what he hoped were keenly trained doctors and nurses with the knowledge to save them.

The doctors first tried Artificial Pneumothorax: The infected lung was collapsed and refilled with gas or filtered air. Treatments were daily. If the patient showed little response, then they used Bilateral Pneumothorax: Sections of both lungs were collapsed permanently. Finally if all else failed, the doctors' only alternative was Thoracoplasty: One side of the rib cage was removed in order to collapse the infected area of the lung. Happily, there is no record of how the lungs were collapsed. All three types of treatment were used on the family, along with the doctors' insistence that all infected by the disease move their beds to the outside courtyard in order to receive plenty of fresh air on sunny days, even in the cold of winter.

But no matter what the specialists tried to apply, the suffering of the family due to the operations and treatments went for naught, for all began to fall to the 'consumption'. Except for one strong daughter who by accident or miracle was spared the disease. Her name was Amanda, and she took the care of her kin from the protesting nurses. The youngest and eldest went first as one by one, the clan wasted away as their desire for food, and for some, life itself, diminished. Through it all, Amanda tended her family. Not a day went by that she did not cook and clean for her sickening kin, though only 16. She encouraged and scolded and pleaded, doing all she could to make her bedridden kinsfolk eat a little soup and bread. And during the days when each slipped closer and closer to their maker, she spent time at their bed reading from the family bible.

Eventually the only help provided by the doctors and nurses were as pallbearers for her pitiful clan. And when the doctors and nurses packed up and left, there was one figure behind a high turret window looking down as they departed, her gaze fixed upon them with hatred and contempt. Amanda. For these 'specialists' had inflicted horrid torments upon her dearest beloved ones only to see them die in agony anyway. Better to have left them alone in peace than suffer as they did.

Amanda somehow clung on and lived to old age, perhaps with only the loving memories of her family and her hatred of those that came promising a cure but leaving only the filled coffins of her tortured family behind to keep her going. And so when she died in her old bedroom upstairs on that cold December day, her bed became her bier. From then on, the

mansion seemingly froze in time, held in stasis by powers unknown.

Then one day a man approached the house in his SUV. He was a lean and sculpted looking type, one secure in being able to handle himself without feeling the need to prove it to others. Having cut his way through the foliage that walled it in, he gingerly walked up the creaking steps of the porch and slowly slid in through the front door, groaning as it did on its rusty hinges. He took in the empty great hall he stepped into, and knew immediately that no living person had been here for years.

Scanning the hallway, he saw a flash of movement across the opposite wall. His hand shot to the pistol in his jacket before he froze. It was his reflection, neatly trimmed beard with short, salt and pepper hair, staring at him in a small mirror hanging on the wall. Releasing a huge sigh of relief with a short laugh, he continued into the mansion. The only sound to be heard was his footsteps upon the protesting wooden floor and the occasional breath of air from outside. Despite the bright sunlight outside, it was dark and uninviting in the house.

He fished a flashlight out of his jacket and turned it on, checking the layout of the house as he did so. It was like stepping back in time. Old oil paintings hung on the walls. Ancient clocks long gone silent rested on mantelpieces. Embroideries rotted away on antique furniture. And faded photographs of people from a different time peered out of pewter stands as they had over a hundred years earlier. His search revealed the master bedroom, laundry room, kitchen, dining room, and living room, even a breakfast area. He grinned. 'Make a nice fixer-upper', he smiled to himself. His gaze took in other rooms off the main hallway that he would have to investigate.

Then he spied the stairway to the second floor.

He furrowed his brow. He had orders to check out the entire house, but he didn't like the looks of those stairs, with its warped and visibly cracked boards. Deciding the best course of action was to stick to the inside of the stairway where it joined the wall, he carefully made his way up the stairs, testing each board as he did so. After each successful step he looked upwards, his flashlight scanning the way ahead.

He made the landing, and exhaled a sigh of relief. Shining the light down the hallway, there were doors to be checked. Some were open: a library, a nursery, another bathroom, a butler's pantry, a smoking room, and a few guest rooms. He approached one closed door and turned the knob. It opened to what must have been a sitting room. Closing it, he spied the final door at the end of the hall. As he reached it, he saw there was something on it. His flashlight scanned the surface to reveal a cracked and peeling painting of a horse, in a style best appreciated by a child. Underneath the horse was the name, 'Amanda'.

He looked down at the doorknob and clasped it, giving it a turn.

Locked. Or stuck. He tried harder, putting his shoulder against the door as well. The door might as well have been nailed shut. 'Oh well, saw most of the house anyway, I'm done here'. He turned and left Amanda's room behind.

The man made his way down to the main hall without incident. After another half hour of searching and note taking he was through with the mansion. As he passed a window he spied something out of the corner of his eye. Two doors at a roughly 45-degree angle against the house. 'Ah, this must be the basement.' He walked outside and pulled back the doors, shining his flashlight within. Heading down the steps, he found himself within an enormous basement that must have stretched almost the entire foundation of the house. It consisted of what once was a huge wine cellar, a storage area, and coal shuttle, with the rest just empty space. The floor was stone tile and the roof held up with archways that gave it an ominous look. It was perfect!

The man left the basement, closing the doors behind him. Turning, he walked along a wall he believed would take him back to his vehicle. Then he reached an archway in the wall and hesitated. Drawing his flashlight, he peered into the space revealed by the arch. His eyes widened. Then he walked into a wide courtyard of flagstone tiles and wrought iron artistry. But the centerpiece that dominated the courtyard was a large round decorative pond, made

of carefully joined pieces of moss-covered limestone two feet high and wide enough to sit on. In the middle of the fountain was a statue of some mythological creature rising from the sea. 'Wow', thought the man in satisfaction, 'we need to use this for sure.'

Making his way back to his SUV, he fired it up and turned on his headlights. He slid it into gear and gently edged forward when the beams illuminated something in the distance he missed when he first arrived. Driving over to a clearing, he saw a large series of structures. As they passed by lit up in his headlights he discovered a large barn, stables, and even a carriage house. A wide grin slowly grew on his face. He fished his cell phone from his jacket and hit a speed dial.

"Keith? Rick. Yeah, looked it over. Tell the boss it's perfect. Yeah, get this. We'll have a barn, stables, and carriage house to go along with a mansion, all at a very reasonable price.", he chuckled. "But the basement is fantastic. The video shoots will be amazing down there. Looks like a medieval dungeon. We'll be able to store all the cages in the barn and stables and even carriage house if need be. So get the slaves and supplies ready for shipping. Are the cameras in yet? Good. We need to get going as soon as possible on this one. I think we can do it in a week, no more than two. Renee will be itching to get started. You know how she loves the dough-re-me.", he grinned. "I'll catch a plane out now from Po-dunk-ville and give a full report Thursday. Yeah. Will do. Really? Save one for me.", he said, laughing. Firing up his vehicle he was back on his way to his hotel room and then the airport. He smiled to himself. 'Looks like we're back in business.' He glanced into his rear view mirror at the old house, and suddenly shuddered.

"Someone's walking over my grave.", he mumbled to himself.

The doorknob to Amanda's room had let out an audible click.

THE EVIL THAT MEN DO

Part 2

"The evil that men do lives after them; The good is oft interred with their bones". Act 3, Scene II – Julius Caesar by William Shakespeare

Renee awoke with a huge yawn and a long, slow, luxurious spread-eagled stretch, which caused the black satin sheets to pull away from her naked, tanned skin. Rising to a sitting position, she dropped her head and rubbed the back of her neck. Then a sly grin formed at the ends of her mouth. 'All work and no play, makes Renee filthy, stinking rich.', she thought. Rolling over in her antique four-poster bed she looked over at her digital clock, which told her it was almost 10:30 pm. Time to prepare for another video extravaganza for her ever-growing video porn fan base. She yawned again and rose slowly, stepping out of bed and lifting her arms before lazily resting them crossed over her head, hips cocked to one side, gazing into her 18th Century gilt full-length mirror. She dropped her hands to her hips and turned one way and then the other, admiring her svelte, nude form in its reflection. 'Not bad for an old groundpounder', she noted with satisfaction, showing the same infectious smile that had won so many over to her cause or into her clutches in the past.

"Ahem. You two want some time alone?"

Renee nearly leapt out of her skin and whirled to make a mad dash to her bathroom before she recognized the voice.

"Goddamnit, Rick! You almost gave me a heart attack. I'm going to kill you one of these days for doing shit like that."

The man in camo fatigues and tank top leaned against the doorframe and smirked. "Not tonight at least.", he replied.

"Don't be too sure." Renee was still pissed and trying to regain her composure, and just stood facing Rick with her arms crossed as he left the doorway and approached her.

"But if you did that, wouldn't you miss this?", he said, gathering her into his arms as he reached her, kissing her passionately on her angry frown. Renee's crossed arms slowly unfolded and wrapped tightly around Rick's hard and lean frame. After a minute, she forced herself to cease kissing but didn't push out of his embrace. "You're sure taking your chances with me. I don't normally let the hired help get this familiar with me."

"I'll gladly take my chances to enjoy what pleasures you may allow me.", Rick breathed huskily into her ear. He pulled Renee tighter and the two began kissing again, more ardently than before. Rick brought his hand down to Renee's breast, the nipple fully erect, and began to softly knead it between his thumb and forefinger, which he knew drove her wild. "Uunnnnmhhh", she moaned. She brought her right hand down to stroke Rick's groin and found his large cock already fully erect and rock hard. She moved her hand to his firm buttocks and began to press her crotch against his, grinding it back and forth. He groaned and began to slowly move the two of them toward her bed before she pushed herself out of his arms.

"Enough, damn you! We have work tonight.", she said firmly, giving Rick's face a firm but good-natured slap for good measure. He smiled broadly back at Renee. He loved to see her like that. "Righto, boss. What lighthearted family romp do you have in mind?"

Renee turned and went to a white four-paneled French Modesty Dressing screen and pulled down an indigo chemise hanging over its side, which she slipped into. "We'll need at least three of the girls, maybe four, so find some that are in the best shape. I noticed last night that we might have to start 'recruiting' again. Most of the ones we have are getting too marked up, so I might have to hedge our bets and sell them all in order to acquire some more. Public always wants to see new faces. But we're on a tight schedule, so I don't know when we'll work that in. Anyway, get them ready for the scene tonight. It's the one in the red folder in the studio. Remember, pick the ones showing the least abuse, and have the ropes and other gear hide the scars. I'll be over as soon as I get ready."

"How about the hubby and his wife? They make quite a hot pair when we play one off the other.", Rick suggested.

Renee thought, head cocked to one side. "Yeah, haven't done them in a week or so. They'll be happy to see each other again I think, at least until the session starts.", she chuckled. Keeping them separated and in the dark about each other's condition kept their reuniting all the more genuinely moving. Which in turn made watching each other tortured even more enjoyable. Lucky to have a couple that really loved each other. "Good idea. Set it up. Another trip to 'Hades' is on for them tonight. But keep a couple of the girls prepped also."

"Right you are, Boss.", Rick smiled, as he gave a mock two-fingered salute before leaving.

Renee took out her cell phone and hit a speed dial button. She paced the room before her call was answered. "Carl. How would you and your perverted brother like to have a little fun tonight?" She grinned. "Thought so. Is your girlfriend at the strip club? Good, bring her along too. Grab your 'Demon' outfits and head on over. Yeah, doing that one again tonight, this time with the husband and wife." She snickered. "Knew you'd like that. About an hour? Perfect. We'll have them ready for you when you get here. Later." Carl and his brother didn't particularly like having to move to the middle of nowhere and his girlfriend almost left him because of it. But she knew her hirelings well. Hand-picked with many years association with her, they'd go anywhere she said because the money was that good. She laughed to herself. 'They'd probably do what I want for free because they like their 'work' so much.', she thought to herself. And they were talented at what they did. Very talented.

Renee locked the door to the master bedroom of the old Victorian house and walked straight into the adjacent ornate bathroom and turned on the shower, her chemise dropping to the floor. It took a fair amount of cash to refurbish the place, so much so she had to leave the upstairs untouched, but it was well worth it. She couldn't recall within recent memory living in such quaint extravagance as the house provided her. The place was already furnished,

if you didn't mind living in a movie set from 'Gone With The Wind'. First, the place was fully exterminated. Then they set about replacing the floor, stairway, and some walls, introducing electricity via the large gas-powered generators they set up just outside the house, installing water heaters and purifiers for the well water on the premises, along with amenities like a well stocked refrigerator and freezer, fully working modern kitchen and laundry. Of course, in their line of work, there was added security with the closed circuit camera system watching all avenues towards the house, and even some watching inside as well for good measure;; the house lacked nothing.

It always put her in the right frame of mind by sticking to her routine. She had meant to clean up last night but the video session with her latest 'acquisition' had been a long but fruitful one. It was sometimes easy working with a new girl and they could produce the best results of all. Being young and terrified at their new surroundings usually made them very receptive and pliable to whatever was required of them. Last night the new girl was no exception and Renee made sure to slowly run her through the wringer to see how far she could take her. It turned out there wasn't much she wouldn't do; she was that frightened at her predicament. She wasn't bad looking either. Had that young, adolescent, and innocent look about her. Could make a nice young pet for her. That hot, heavy, and intense first meeting with her new slave had worn out Renee as much as the new girl so she had decided to skip her usual bath and just strip and slide into bed. Now as she shampooed her short, raven-black hair and felt the hot, soapy water run down her flesh she felt herself becoming invigorated and ready for whatever the night may bring.

Toweling off, she began to take stock of the night's activities ahead of her. She had to set up the new video shoot for tonight, and had to decide how the two or three on one setup was going to work. The feedback on her online video store showed more and more requests forthcoming to have another brutal gang-bang with her 'actors'. She didn't particularly like doing those, not because of any feelings of how it would affect her property, but that she'd have to pay the idiots taking part in abusing her captives. Plus, she didn't like others taking part in her operation. Left too many loose strings attached. But, as long as they knew she was no person to cross, it was worth the chance. The reward could be triple the usual intake of funds or more. And it also fit in well for the husband and wife they had locked up. Carl and the others she had in mind for the shoot didn't care whether they got to sexually assault women or men, as long as physical and mental abuse were involved. And the looks on the faces of both the husband and wife, and their reactions as their opposite half were utterly abused and humiliated in front of each other with nothing they could do to stop it, was pure gold.

Since the shoot was going to feature a 'descent into hell' angle, complete with the basement decorated with crimson stalactites and stalagmites and a fog machine pouring out lurid dark lighting for effect, she decided on her red latex outfit. She casually slid into a revealing jacket, full-length gloves reaching to her elbows, a G-string complete with an attached devil tail trailing behind, thigh-high stiletto-heel boots, and a full-length cape. Lastly, she put on a red velvet mask that covered most of her face except for her luscious mouth.

Adjusting her outfit and double-checking it in the mirror, she beamed and blew a kiss to herself before walking toward the bedroom door. Then she suddenly stopped, her hand stretched outward for the door latch.

Far away at the limit of her hearing, and from somewhere overhead, she heard a thump. She continued to stand still, breathing shallowly, and tried to recognize the sound and where it was coming from. It seemed to come from one of the rooms upstairs. The sound was difficult to identify, coming from far off and at infrequent intervals. The only thing she knew for sure was it was getting louder.

Renee stepped to her door and opened it slowly, looking to the left and right quickly as she did so. There was nothing to be seen but the dark main room of the old house with its museum-like furnishings, lit only from the light of the open door to the basement some distance away. Listening carefully, the sound had stopped. She frowned, then closed and locked her door and headed for the stairs to the basement.

"Renee".

Renee froze at the whisper that called her name. It seemed to be right next to her ear. A shiver ran through her body. The darkness in the room seemed sentient, a living presence watching her.

Then the sound overhead began again, causing her to whirl and peer around to find its origin. Renee's heart was beating wildly, a jab of fear giving her goose bumps.

Looking up again, the thumping noises seemed to be occurring in the hallway upstairs now, and were slowly heading towards the stairway landing that led down to the main room. She recognized them now, the rhythmic movements of footsteps. But everyone else except her was in the basement. Who was that?

"Rick? Is that you? This isn't funny, you asshole!", Renee shouted.

The sound of footsteps stopped.

She could almost hear her heartbeat in the murky room. The air was suddenly heavy and oppressive. Renee began to approach the stairway, her legs moving forward slowly, as if she were wading through heavy surf. The stairs loomed closer and soon she laid a hand on the rail. All was silent as a tomb. One at a time, she carefully placed a foot on each stair step and headed upwards, her eyes peering intently to try to pierce the gloom. She had almost reached the landing and was about to turn and look down the hallway when she heard her name called again.

"Renee?", Rick called from the basement. "RENEE! Are you coming already, we're all waiting on your sweet and precious ass!"

She stopped and turned her head back at Rick's call. Then with a last quick look towards the direction of the hallway she turned away and strode down the stairs and headed towards the basement. "I thought we had this place exterminated. I'm going to have to do something about the rats in the walls here.", she said aloud to herself, partly for reassurance in the imposing room. She headed down the basement stairs and closed the door.

Upstairs in the hallway, the door to Amanda's room began to open slowly.

THE EVIL THAT MEN DO

Part 3

"The evil that men do lives after them; The good is oft interred with their bones". Act 3, Scene II – Julius Caesar by William Shakespeare

"Hello, sleepy-head, time to wake up! Got some work to do tonight, you lucky boy! Can't just lie around, you have to earn your keep, you know", Renee called cheerfully. She was holding a lantern in the gloomy stables. Before her lay a nude man in his mid-twenties lying on his back in a cage on the dirt floor. The cage was made of one-inch wide flat iron straps criss-crossed at ninety-degree intervals and arranged by one-foot spaces. It was roughly seven feet long by three and a half feet wide and two feet high. The man had a metal cuff locking his right wrist firmly to the floor of the cage. There were similar cages arranged in the empty horse stalls in the stables, containing a person like himself, although they contained almost all women and young girls. They were now softly moaning and crying imploringly for food and water, or a blanket to cover their nakedness.

"What... I... please... water.", Kent croaked hoarsely. He held his free hand up to block

the painful light stabbing his eyes. Lifting his head slightly and squinting through bleary, light deprived eyes he saw a woman dressed in a red devil outfit, holding a lantern in her hand. Chalking her image up to another ghostly hallucination, he rested his head back down on the dirt floor.

Renee brought her lantern closer to inspect her slave. 'Damn', she thought, 'I should have checked on him more often'. The man lying before her had lost weight, almost too much to be presentable for tonight. Then the fetid aroma of a terrible stench rising up from the man assaulted her senses. He had been locked up in his cage in his own filth for who knew how long. She turned to the man standing next to her. He was wearing old trousers held up by suspenders, a worn long sleeve shirt with the sleeves rolled up, calf-high leather wellington boots, and a surrey tweed cap. He looked like he just stepped out of a London pub, and his breath would have confirmed that.

"How long has this been going on?", she inquired.

"What d'you mean?", Archie replied. Archie was someone she was regretting hiring long ago. Tall and built solidly though somewhat on the pudgy side, she found him in some dive in Liverpool where he worked as a bouncer and her wit and charm and a little bit of cash brought him over to her side. He said he used to be a boxer and his cauliflower ears and badly set broken nose held little doubt to that. It seemed to her he was a man that could at least handle himself in dire straits so he was made a member of her slavery/video porn enterprise. Ever since then however, she was beginning to suspect she made a mistake. Too many times she found him drunk and belligerent, abusing her property when she was away no matter how many times she demanded him not to do so. Now he had put an entire video shoot in peril.

"Come on, mate!", Archie said, avoiding Renee's question by kicking the cage with his boot, sending the girls around them into another frenzy of wailing. "You 'eard the lass! Its work day for you, now, isn't it?", Archie grinned wolfishly.

"Shut up!", Renee shouted at her slaves before looking at Archie contemptuously. The girls hushed their sobbing immediately. "What have you been doing with the money I gave you to buy food for my slaves?", she asked, testily, as one might ask of a child.

"Just what you said, buyin' grub for 'em, 'aven't I!", he insisted.

Renee gave Archie a skeptical glare before turning and holding her lantern high and searching around the stables. She spotted a wooden barrel in the far corner of the room and strode over to inspect it. It yielded the results she expected to find. Gathering up some cans in her free hand, she walked back to Archie and presented them to him.

"Dog food?", she declared angrily. "You've been buying dog food for them?"

Archie looked at the cans. "It's the best kind, isn't it? I been savin' you money, I 'as!", Archie exclaimed defensively.

She gave Archie a baleful look before walking back over to the barrel again and dropping the dog food cans on the floor. She began rummaging around some more. She heard the sound of bottles clinking and held the lantern over the barrel. Archie began to look worried and shuffled his feet from side to side. Renee walked back carrying a bottle, her boots thudding ominously.

"Saved me some money, did you?", Renee said sarcastically. "So that you could spend it on cheap booze for yourself?"

Archie looked at the bottle Renee held out to him and put his hands behind his back, still shuffling his feet from side to side. He looked down at the floor. "Well, I, I just, ye see, me rheumatism it 'urts somethin' terrible..."

"Goddammit, Archie!", Renee screamed. "Don't you know that what's in dog food is bad for humans? There's not enough nutrition in dog food to keep a human alive for long and the *prions they contain can lead to disease and death!" The girls in their cages were too frightened to make a sound, so terrifying Renee's voice sounded.

"Huh?", asked a stunned Archie. "A prion? What's a prion? I used to eat dog food once in a while when I was a kid, didn't I? Dere ain't nuthin' wrong wit' it."

Renee stood there glaring at Archie, wondering whether to kill him on the spot or simply laugh out loud. She then hurled the bottle past Archie to crash against the stable wall behind him and stood silently furious for a few seconds.

"You know," she said, shaking her head at Archie, "that explains a lot." She looked down at Kent lying in his cage before turning her murderous eyes back on him. "Get him ready for tonight. He needs cleaning up, give him a little food, and I mean **REAL FOOD** this time, some water, and do it quickly, do you understand?", she said, her voice slow and thick with malice. "Or so help me God, I'll..."

"N-now, now, s-sure Missy. Just leave it to me. 'Ol Archie'll get 'im all fixed up, right as rain, won't I now, you'll see.", a thoroughly cowed Archie exclaimed. He watched her stride quickly and angrily from the stables. Then he looked down at Kent, who had become unconscious. A scowl covered his face.

"Ere you!", Archie shouted, kicking the cage near the man's head again, causing the slave girls to cry in fear, something Archie reveled in. "You're getting up tonight, and you're not getting me in trouble again, are you? Eatin' dog food's too good for you, aye? Well, I got something you're going to eat you'll wish were dog food, won't you now?", he snarled as he slipped off his suspenders and began to unzipper his pants.

"And what would that be, Archie?", a female voice inquired.

Archie froze before jerking his head around. There was a woman of medium height and firm build standing there with a hand on her hip carrying a flashlight, a quizzical look on her face. She had straight, blonde hair cascading over her shoulders. She wore black latex slacks with a red halter and black boots.

"Ere, now Annie, what are you doin' there? Spyin' on me, are you?"

"Call it what you want.", she said, crossing her arms, one eyebrow arched. "And, helping you get Kent ready for tonight. Renee wants to see to it you don't screw up again." She shone the flashlight on his partially unzipped fly. "Looks like I got here just in time."

Archie quickly zipped up and slipped his suspenders back on. "Aw now then, I was just 'avinin' a bit of a lark wit' ol' Kent 'ere, now wasn't I?", he replied, forcing an unconvincing laugh. He produced some keys and unlocked the cage, swinging the rusted lid back and over with a clang of metal. Unlocking the metal cuff holding Kent fast to the cage, he slipped his arms under him and easily brought the dazed prisoner to his feet.

"Cor, blimey, what a stink! 'E's been livin' in sheit, 'e 'as!". Archie grimaced as he lifted Kent out of his cage and put him down unsteadily on his feet.

"And whose fault is that?", Annie sneered. She was shocked at the prisoner's condition. Not only was he living in deplorable conditions, she could see that he was not far off from being dangerously malnourished. But for now, she thought, he should be ok for the video shoot.

"Ere we go, Sunny Jim! Let's 'ave a walk to the courtyard and a nice bath for yas, 'ow does that sound?" Archie began to move with Kent's left arm over his shoulders but Annie held out a hand to stop him.

"I'll take him. You clean up in here before you do anything else, ok? Oh, and after that go to the basement studio, they'll need you for the video shoot tonight." She and Kent disappeared from the stables into the darkness. Some of the girls were reaching through the slats in their cages as Annie passed by, trying to grasp her pants cuff, begging piteously for water and food. Annie looked down in pure disgust. As soon as she could she'd see to it they were properly fed and watered.

Back in the cage room, Archie fumed. "Stay 'ere, Archie, clean up 'is sheit, Archie, kiss my arse, Archie. Well, I'm not going to take this from the likes of you or anyone again, I ain't!" He stomped off to fetch a broom and a bucket of water and more hay from the barn near the courtyard outside, cursing under his breath as he went. Then he grinned. "A video shoot, ye says? Well now then, that'll be a bit o' fun, won't it now? Maybe I'll get meself a piece o' poor Kent's wifey, aye? Wouldn't that be a shame, now would it?", he chuckled to himself.

THE EVIL THAT MEN DO

Part 4

"The evil that men do lives after them; The good is oft interred with their bones". Act 3, Scene II – Julius Caesar by William Shakespeare

Taking Kent's arm over her shoulders as she walked off with him, Annie noted with alarm he wasn't much trouble to lift. But it was slow going because Kent hadn't been let out of his cage in a while and was still shaky on his legs. Luckily it was a straight shot across from the stables to the courtyard.

Annie asked, "Kent, do you feel like a little broth and bread and water?" Kent nodded absently. "Ok, then, stay with me, we're going to give you a bath first and then some food, ok?" Again the disinterested nod. Annie's unease grew.

"How... is my... is Karen all right?", Kent asked suddenly.

Annie bit her lower lip before answering. "She's doing great, Kent. Now, don't worry about her just now. We need to clean you up and get some food into you, ok?

Kent nodded. "Can I see her, be with her... soon?"

"Sure, don't see why not.", Annie winced at her half-truth. They'd be seeing each other all right. But not in the manner they would prefer. The two continued stumbling across a grass field, lit by Annie's flashlight.

"Who was that I saw earlier?"

"What do you mean?", Annie replied.

"A woman. Or devil. Was with the English guy. She was wearing red clothing and holding a lantern.", Kent said.

"Oh, that was Renee.", Annie smiled.

"Is she a devil, or a ghost?"

Annie laughed. "Well, as far as being a devil, yeah, I'd have to say so. But why do you say a ghost?"

They started to ascend a slight rise in the ground, which made it tougher on Kent. Making their way slowly, by the time they reached the top with the courtyard in sight Kent was winded so Annie stopped to let him rest his legs.

Kent shrugged. "I don't know. I've been... seeing... hearing... things. Shadows, lights, sounds... nearby in the darkness. Then I saw a girl."

"A girl?", Annie asked.

"Yeah.", Kent replied. "She comes by every once in a while. She sits on my cage and we talk. She asks me why I'm in that cage and where my clothes are. She said she had never seen a naked man before. When I first saw her I tried to cover myself but it's hard with one hand. She drapes her dress over myself now so I'm not embarrassed. Her family wonders why you are all here and why you're doing this to people. I don't know what to tell her. I ask her if she sees Karen to tell her I'm ok. She says she will, but every time she comes back, she says she hasn't seen her. Are you sure Karen is ok?"

Annie began to get an unsettling feeling the more Kent talked. "Yes, Kent, Karen is ok. I told you she is. Let's get going again." Kent nodded. They drew a breath together and kept walking to the courtyard. "What does this girl look like?"

Kent thought. "She's about 16 or 17 I'd say. Long, curly, brunette hair tied up in bows. Pretty face but she looks sad most of the time. And she must belong to a reenactment group because she wears these old clothes like from the 19th century, Victorian era stuff. The clothes you see in old family portraits like after the Civil War. Anyway, I'm probably just dreaming it all up, right?"

Annie let out an unconvincing laugh, "I'd probably say so. I don't think that..."

Suddenly it became terribly cold. Kent shuddered. The two came to a stop. Then the flashlight went out, plunging them into darkness.

"What the hell?", Annie said. "I just put new batteries in this."

"That's how it feels.", Kent said.

Annie looked at Kent. "How what feels?", she asked.

"When the girl comes by to see me.", Kent replied.

The chill deepened. The two of them could see their breath condensate as mist in the air. Now it was Annie's turn to shudder.

Just as quickly, the cold went away. The flashlight came back on.

Annie and Kent looked at each other, and then around themselves. Then they began moving toward the courtyard more quickly this time.

Annie and her unsteady burden walked onto a courtyard under a starlit sky, the humid scent of wisteria borne aloft from somewhere nearby. There were patches of mist hanging in the air, giving the courtyard a mystical feel about it. The moon had long since set. Voices could be heard, one or two female and several male voices not far off. Kent heard a faint humming sound, and then he was placed against a wall when suddenly a sharp spray of cold water hit him. With a gasp he tried to turn away from the jet of water. Looking for its source, he saw Annie holding a spray nozzle attached to what looked to be a battery powered water sprayer with a large tank of obviously unheated water. Annie's voice sternly commanded him to stand still. When he didn't, he then felt hands grab his arms and hold them steady behind his back as he felt manacles lock onto his wrists. Then a metal collar was locked around his neck and a chain from an iron ring set in the stone wall of the courtyard attached to it. After that, the water from the water sprayer returned, squirting him hard all over and leaving him shivering and panting in the night air.

The jet of water ceased, and he heard Annie command, "Turn around and spread your legs." Despite his concerns at this, Kent did as he was told. But then he felt warm soapy water from a sponge scrub around his buttocks, genitalia, and up and down each leg, which gave him immediate bliss. He was sprayed down again, and the sponge returned, soaping him down all around his body. Kent had to repress a laugh. He suddenly visualized himself as a pet dog being given his bath. Annie stepped up and unhooked the chain to his collar.

"On your knees.", Annie's voice returned in its dull monotone. Kent dropped carefully to his knees and felt his hair being shampooed clean. Then the hose finally rinsed him off all over. Despite his unenviable situation, he couldn't help let out a huge sigh at the simple ecstasy of being clean all over.

Annie turned off the hose and began to towel Kent off as he got to his feet. "Now doesn't that feel better?", she asked.

"Arf.", Kent replied, feeling surprisingly content with his captor. **'Stockholm Syndrome?', he thought. Smiling, Annie looked into his eyes and patted his head. "Good boy. Now, let's get some food, some real food into you. Feel like eating something?"

"Arf, arf.", Kent repeated.

Annie chuckled. "Too bad your hands are locked or I'd make you walk on all fours, my little puppy. But at least you can have your leash." Annie detached Kent's collar from the iron ring on the wall and withdrew a chain leash from a zipper bag and locked it onto his collar. "Let's go, Fido."

Kent started to bark another answer, but someone he saw made him freeze in place. Annie saw his face and turned to see whom it was he saw but was too late. Kent leapt from her grasp, the chain slipping through her hands and dragging on the ground behind him. There across the courtyard was a nude woman being cleaned up much like himself. She was petite, pale, and fragile, with short, curly brunette hair clinging to her face and neck. Her hands were cuffed behind her back as well with a similar collar around her neck restraining her to the wall. It looked as though she was crying. As Kent got closer he began to call out to her.

"Karen! Karen! It's me! It's Kent!"

The woman's head whirled around, looking for the source of the sound. She saw Kent approaching, and tried to run to him but was held in place by the chain attached to her collar affixed to the wall.

"Kent! You're alive!"

"Karen! Are you all right?", he asked, stupidly. He could see she was not. She had always been frail, like a little porcelain doll, but now he could see her ribs starting to protrude. A stab of fear for her condition pierced his heart.

As Kent neared Karen he slipped and fell on the courtyard. He could hear footsteps approaching him rapidly but all he could think of was reaching his wife. Awkwardly, he got up on his feet as best he could and tried to run towards her. He closed to within a dozen strides before the footsteps caught up with him, knocking him to the ground. Then he screamed as he felt the shock of a cattle prod on his back, immobilizing him. He heard Karen wailing in misery for him.

"Don't! Leave him alone! Please, leave him alone!"

As the numbness of the shock began to wear off, Kent felt himself being jerked to his feet by the chain to his collar. As he staggered upright, a voice spoke out.

"Stop!", Annie commanded. "Let him go to her."

Kent felt the chain go slack. He moved, half stumbling, half sliding across the courtyard until he reached Karen and felt her collapse upon his body, sobbing heavily in her wretchedness. She curled up into a fetal position and Kent tried as best he could to surround her with his body. They kissed passionately and rubbed their faces against each other.

"Why? Why are they doing this to us? What have we done to deserve this?", Karen cried.

"Karen, you've got to be strong.", Kent replied, trying to put up a strong front. "We've got to hang on for each other, understand? Somehow, some way, we can get through this, but you've got to be strong! Will you try?"

Karen slowly nodded her head, sobbing, resigned to their fates. Kent looked up at the figures standing around them.

"Ok, let's get this over with.", he said, attempting to look and sound brave. He hoped he was convincing.

TO BE CONTINUED....

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Next issue: Halloween
Interviews with Kathe Koja
and Ray Garton, horrific art and stories
about the slenderman.